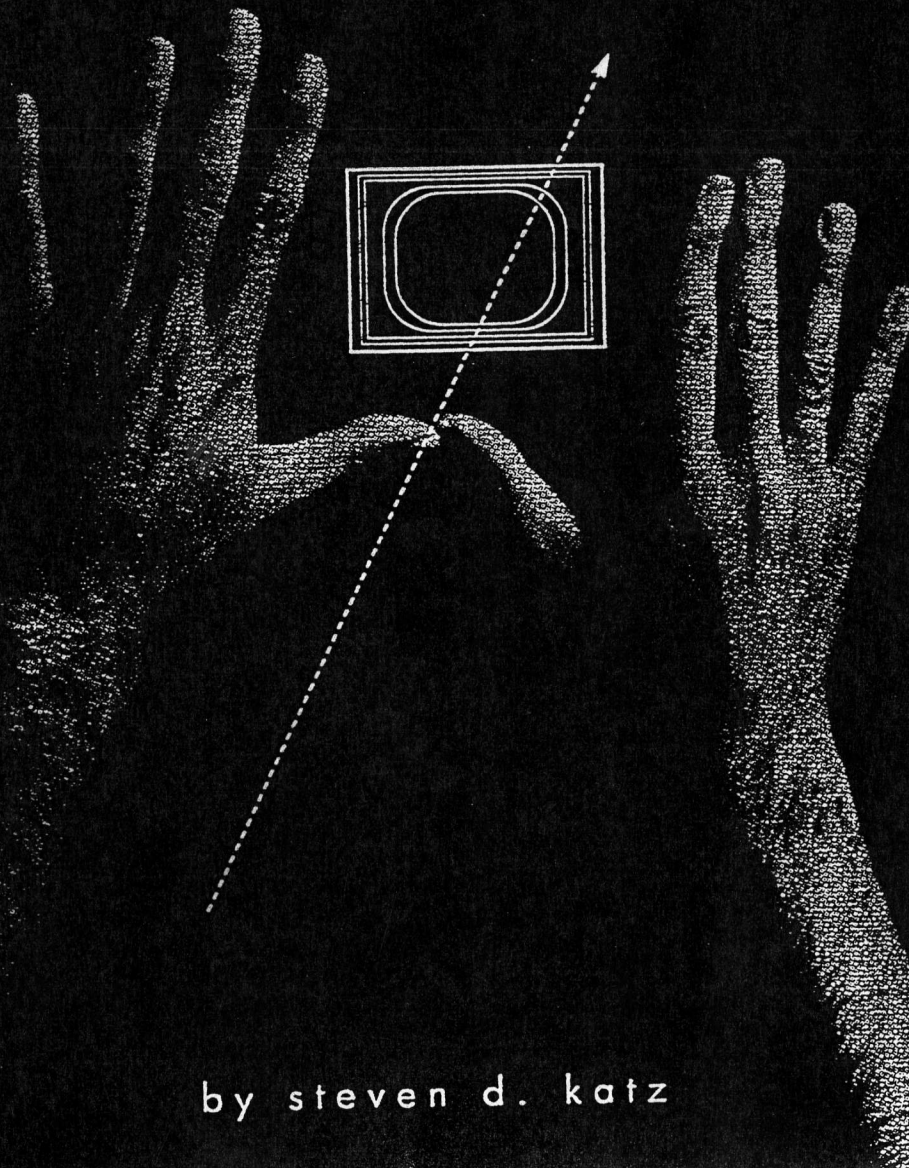


# film directing **shot by shot**

visualizing from concept to screen



by steven d. katz

# 6 COMPOSING SHOTS: SPATIAL CONNECTIONS

## Shot Size

As we all know, the universal units of composition are the long shot, the medium shot, and the close-up. These shots are a development of the continuity system insofar as they are overlapping portions of a single space and only make sense in relation to one another. That is, they are used together to create a consistent spatial/temporal order. Though they can be used to describe spaces as large as the solar system or as small as the head of a pin, we always know approximately how large an area is being framed when these terms are used. That's because the shots are scaled to the subject and related to one another proportionately.

A long shot of the World Trade Center frames all of the twin towers and a generous piece of Manhattan; a medium shot of the building would lop off some of the lower floors. Moving in for a close-up, a single window might fill the frame. There are no absolute rules in the use of these terms and even the terms themselves vary. In Figure 6.1 on page 122 the basic framing heights are shown for the human figure.

The change of size from shot to shot varies but is determined by the limits of identification. As long as we recognize that each shot is an overlapping portion of the wide shot, the change in scale is permissible. Actually, even this definition must take into account the change in editing styles over several decades. The move from wide shot to close-up was considered too radical a jump for audiences during the first five decades of motion pictures unless a medium shot was used in between. Hollywood editors were forbidden to juxtapose a wide shot with a close-up lest they confuse the audience as to where the close-up was taking place. Today, after several decades of familiarity with Hollywood conventions, audiences easily accept extreme changes in scale. If anything, it is likely that the conservative editing rules of the past lagged behind audience understanding.

Visual recognition between shots, however, is only half the strategy of the continuity style. Most often the relationship between shots is one of implication or inference. For example, we see a wide shot of a man approaching a door. This is followed by a cut to an extreme close-up of the man's hand turning the doorknob. Even if the doorknob was too small to attract our attention in the wide shot, we *expect* that it is connected to the previous shot since it makes logical sense, even though we could be looking at another doorway in a different place and time. Narrative logic and the visual connection between shots cooperate to create a



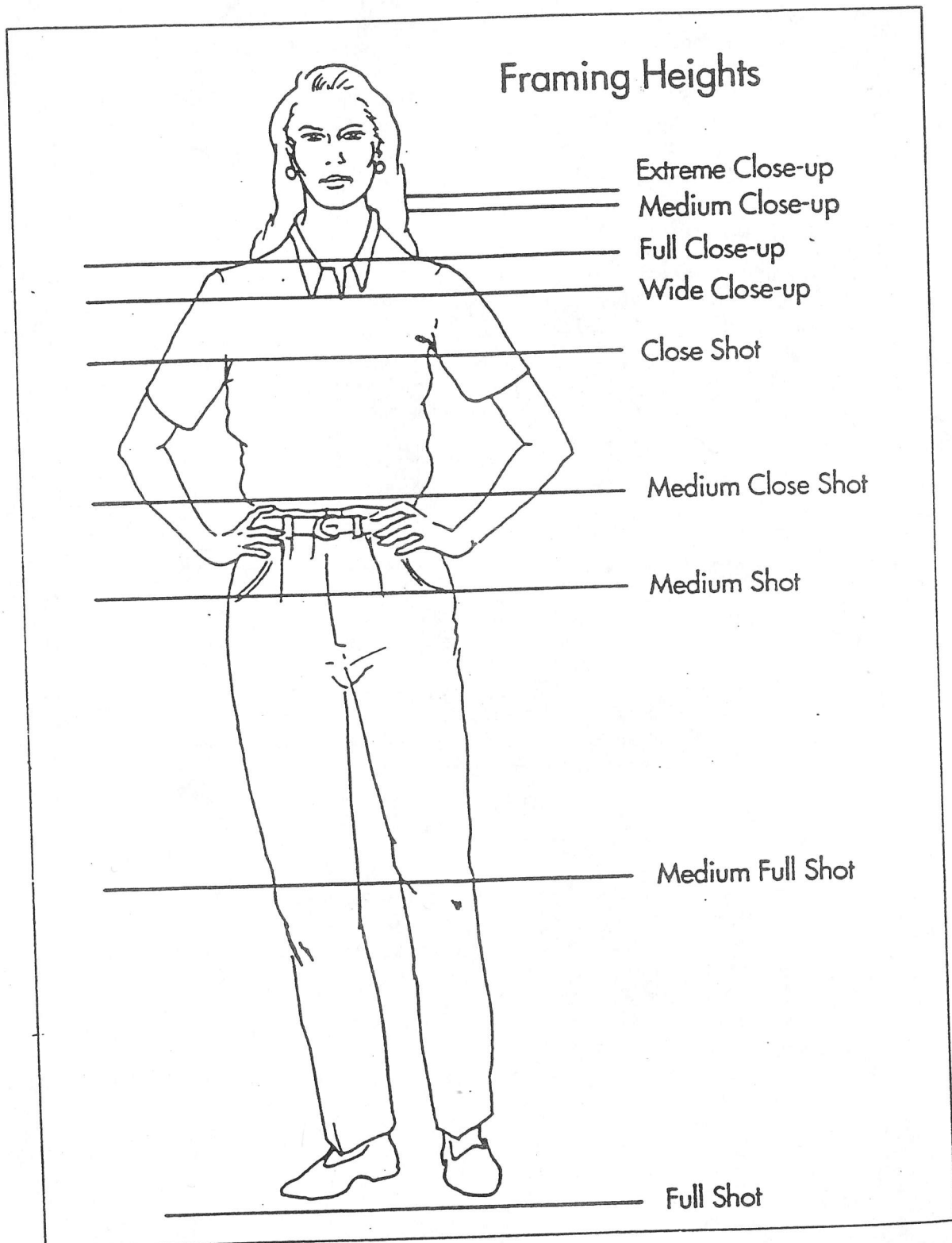


Figure 6.1: Basic Framing heights for the human figure.

sense of continuous space. This pair of ideas, cause and effect and spatial recognition, provide the organizational basis of the continuity style.

Long shots, medium shots, and close-ups can describe any subject or location but are most often used to describe the human figure. The terms take on special meaning in this connection. Here the change in scale between shots is not related by logic or visual recognition alone. Instead, framing is determined by conventions of post-Renaissance art or what are generally considered pleasing and balanced compositions.

### The Close-up

Television has greatly increased the use of the close-up. To compensate for the small size of the screen, the close-up is used to bring us into closer contact with the action. For dialogue sequences the shoulder-and-head shot has become the predominant framing. Cost-minded producers like the tighter shots because they are easier to light and can be joined to almost any other shot, reducing the amount of coverage needed. The preference for the close-up has been carried over to feature films as more and more film directors graduate from television to the big screen.

In film the eyes have it. Jean-Luc Godard once said that the most natural cut is the cut on the look. The powerful suggestiveness of this gesture helps explain film's love affair with winks, glances, stares, tears, squints, glares and the whole range of language that the eyes command. The eyes are perhaps the most expressive feature of the human face, communicating silently what the mouth must do largely with words and sounds. A look can tell us that an object out of frame is of interest, and it can tell us in which direction the object is located. In the same way that the focal length of the lens and the angle of the camera can place the viewer in a definite relationship with the subjects on the screen, the eye-line of a subject clearly determines spatial relations in the scene space. Viewers are particularly sensitive to incongruities in the sight lines between subjects who are looking at each other and in most situations can easily detect when the eye match is slightly off. The use of lens-axis teleprompters has come about largely because audiences are aware when a performer is looking at a cue card that is only a few inches off center.

The close-up can bring us into a more intimate relationship with the subjects on the screen than we would normally have with anyone but our closest friends or family. Sometimes this capacity for inspection can be overdone, and the close-up becomes a violation of privacy by forcing a degree of intimacy that should only be shared by consent. The camera, however, does not require consent, particularly if it is equipped with a telephoto lens. Television news cameramen frequently pry into the lives of families during moments of grief, using extreme close-ups. Viewers may find themselves uncomfortable watching scenes that they would normally have the tact to turn away from in their daily lives.

In every culture there are customs of privacy, physical contact and accepted behavior based on the distances permitted between people in various situations. A filmmaker can use the camera to record these social distances in such a way that we react to them as if they were happening

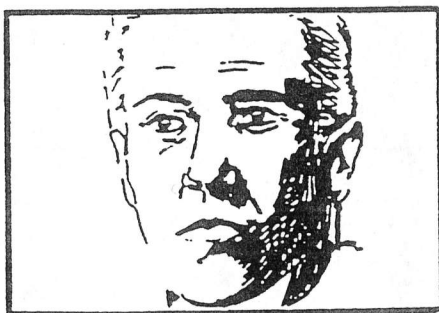
within our own personal space. Not only can the close-up reveal the intimate, it can make us feel as if we are intruding on moments of privacy or sharing a moment of vulnerability—as if the person on the screen has opened himself up to us. We can be made to feel detachment or an emotional involvement with events and subjects on the screen largely through the manipulation of space with the lens of the camera.

Figure 6.2 features a series of eight close-up framings in three aspect ratios, Academy aperture, which is the same as 16mm and television (1.33:1); wide screen (1.85:1); and the anamorphic Cinemascope process (2.35:1).

The images are shown in pairs as they might appear together in a sequence because the balance or imbalance of any frame is dependent on the shots that come before and after it. In the first two frames the subjects are positioned dead center. If you move your eyes over these frames, “reading” them as though they were edited, you will see that there is no rhythm in the shot change since the eyes remain focused on the center of the screen. Compare this with frames 3 and 4. Here the off-center compositions in alternate close-ups creates a left/right eye motion that is dynamic. This effect becomes more pronounced as the width of the screen increases. Here we have a good example of what is meant by sequential art, since compositions are not judged individually but by how they combine in a sequence.

Conventions in western art favor portraits that position the human face slightly off-center to avoid disturbing symmetrical compositions. The customary solution is to leave extra space on the side of the screen the subject is looking at and more space at the bottom of the frame than at the

Figure 6.2: Close-ups in three aspect ratios.



1



3



2



4



5



6



7



8



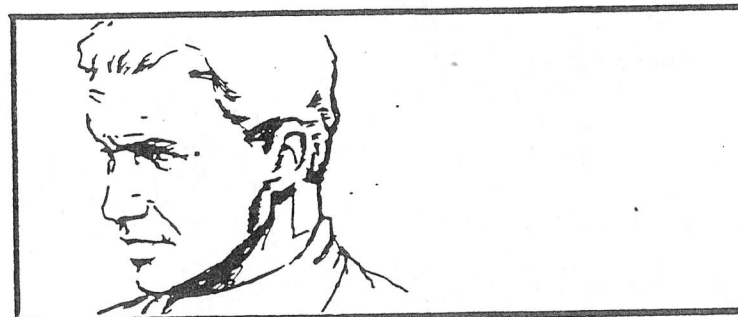
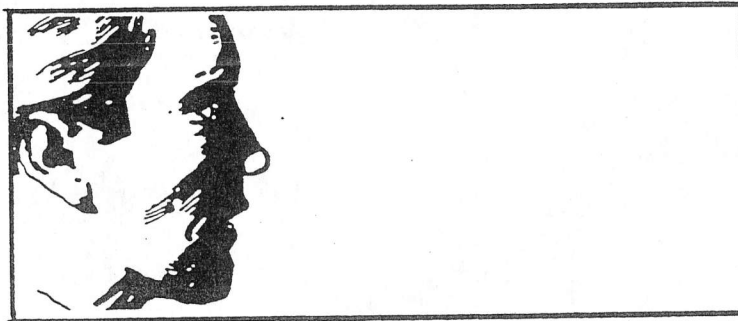
top. In film, the use of off-center compositions becomes more common as the screen widens. But don't let this stand in the way of experimentation. There is no reason for filmmakers to accept these limitations if they do not suit their sense of design. The following examples illustrate common and uncommon framing proportions.

Extreme use of screen width is possible as shown in Figure 6.3, illus-

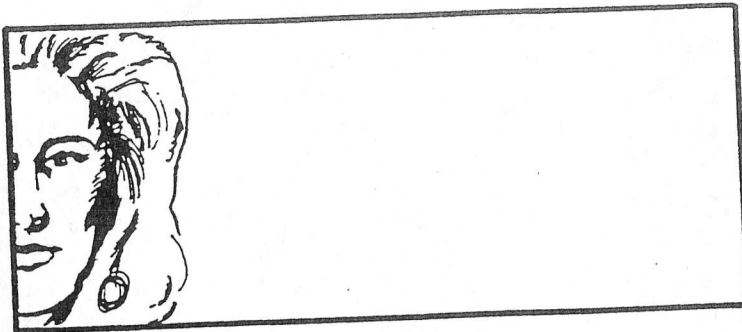
trating unconventional treatments of portrait composition. Sharply off-center framing is possible in any aspect ratio though the effect becomes more pronounced the wider the screen. This type of composition has become quite common in television commercials recently, influenced by print graphics in advertising. This has had a subtle influence on the movies, which tend to absorb techniques from the other arts.

The eyes, mouth and ears are frequently given extreme close-ups of their own, usually to advance some specific part of the narrative. For example, a shot of a woman walking home alone at night on a lonely street might be followed by an extreme close-up of her ear, as faint footsteps are heard. A similar setup might utilize a close-up of her eyes indicating her fear. These are familiar devices and there are many more ways that you can utilize macro close-ups if you begin to experiment. Three versions of extreme and macro close-ups are shown in Figure 6.4 on page 128. In all cases, the viewpoint was from the front or side of the face

Figure 6.3



4



5



6



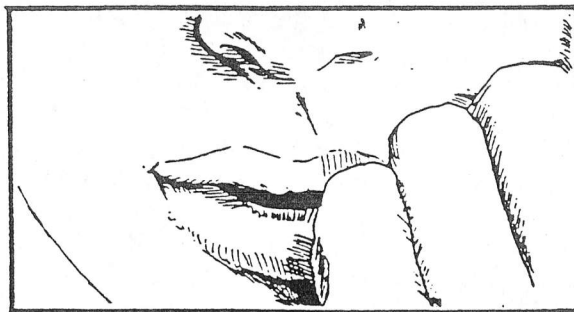
favoring the features. This is just one more convention that need not limit your individual style. Unconventional viewpoints, framing and shot size can be used to explore portraiture through texture, light and the infinite varieties of form. This does not mean that you have to give up traditional methods. They are by no means exhausted and can be as communicative, startling and moving as more experimental techniques.

### The Medium Shot

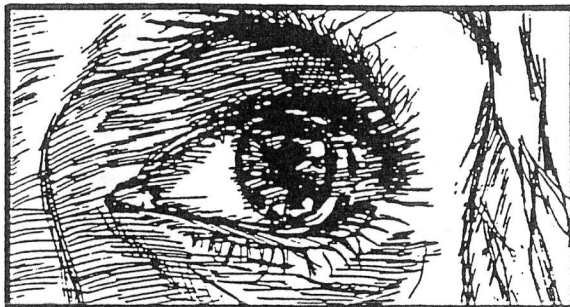
Before television began emphasizing the use of the close-up and extreme close-up, the medium shot was the workhorse for dialogue scenes throughout the sound period. Combining valuable qualities of the full shot and the close-up, it is still widely employed in television and feature films. Like the full shot, the medium shot captures an actor's gestures and body language, but is still tight enough to include subtle variations in facial expression.

The medium shot is also the general range in which group shots are





1



2



3

Figure 6.4

composed for dialogue scenes. The two-shot, three-shot, four-shot or five-shot are the typical groupings. With more than five players in the frame the camera often must pull back into the full-shot range to include everyone if the figures are not significantly overlapped. The medium shot shares the honors with the close-up for popularity at the present time but only insofar as it is used in conjunction with close-ups—not as the primary setup for a scene. We will pass over examples of medium shots in this section and cover them in depth later in the workshop section of the book.

### The Full Shot

The full shot as an alternative to the medium or close-up has fallen into disuse in the last twenty years, relegated to the function of an establishing shot when it is necessary to connect a character and a location in a single shot. Filmmakers seem to be reluctant to play a scene wide if a close-up

or medium shot can be substituted. One of the reasons the full shot is underused is that it requires dialogue scenes to be played in long takes. This is because the full shot usually frames all the speaking characters in a scene, making a cutting pattern of medium and close-up shots unnecessary. If the long shot is used with these two tighter framings, the editing pattern invariably moves in close and does not return to the full shot. While the medium and long shots can encompass the action in a scene without resorting to other shots to fulfill the narrative, a close-up generally must be accompanied by other close-ups, medium or full shots to fulfill the narrative requirements of a scene.

One of the full shot's most attractive qualities is that it allows the actor to use body language. This type of physical expression has all but disappeared from the movies since the silent period. Again, television and tight-fisted producers are to blame since there is nothing as inexpensive to shoot or to light as the close-up. This is most clear in the way dance is photographed in music videos, which rarely show the full figure in extended shots.

Compositionally, the long shot of a single figure offers many of the same opportunities for asymmetrical framing as the close-up. The vertical line of the standing figure easily fits into designs that stress graphic patterns particularly in the wider formats.

Figure 6.5 on page 130 features two full shots illustrating frame balance. Slightly off-center framing is so common today that a centered subject is nearly as powerful as a drastically decentered composition.

## The Line of Action

The general approach in this book is to encourage the development of solutions that are adapted to the individual needs of the filmmaker. Many of the solutions that will be shown are part of recognizable strategies, but the filmmaker's personal vision can at any time overrule systems, accepted practice, traditional wisdom or convention. Having said that, we can look at the most basic rule of camera placement that the continuity system observes: the line of action.

The purpose of the line of action is quite simple: It organizes camera angles to preserve consistent screen direction and space. It's also useful for organizing the shooting plan. Because the set has to be relit every time the camera is moved to a new angle, it makes sense to gang shots sharing a similar angle of view together, so that they can be shot at one time. This avoids having to light any camera position more than once.

We can think of the line of action as an imaginary partition running through the space in front of the camera. It was originally devised to make sure that if multiple angles of a scene were shot, they could be cut together without a confusing reversal of left and right screen space. This way, subjects moving through the frame in one shot continue in the same direction in a subsequent shot. The line of action is also called the "180-degree rule" or the "axis of action," illustrated in Figure 6.6 on page 131. To maintain consistent screen direction of the two people seated at the table, the continuity system proposes that an imaginary line of action be drawn

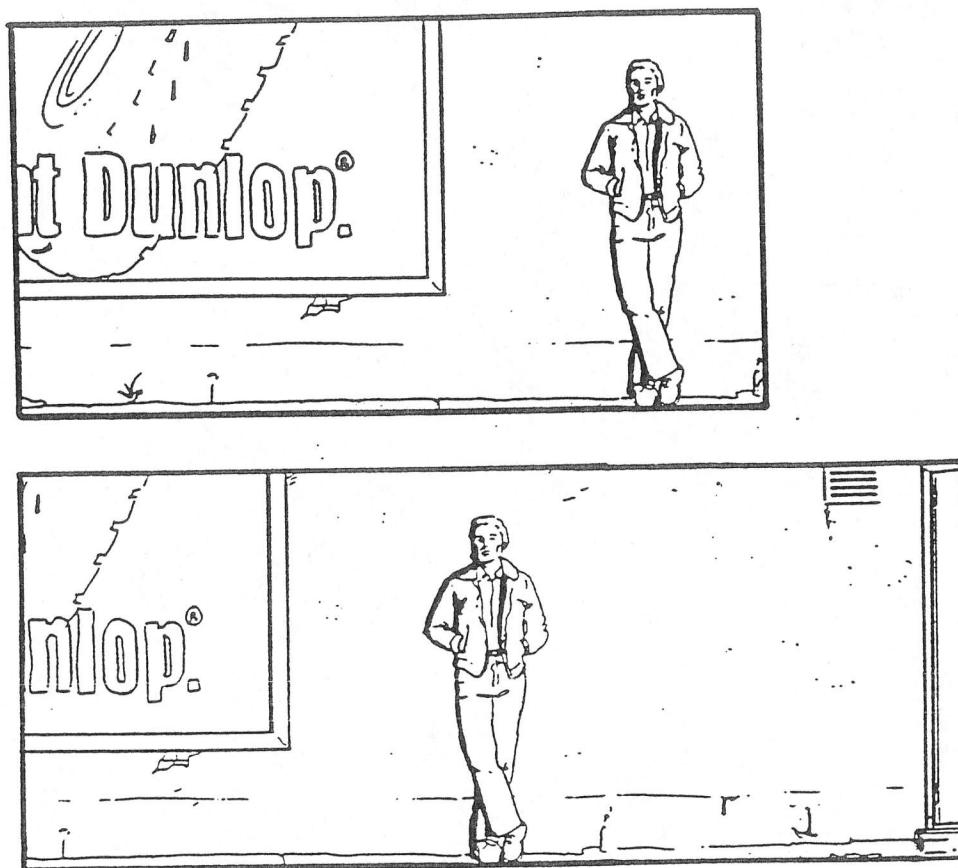


Figure 6.5: Frame balance.

between them. The direction of the line can be anywhere the filmmaker chooses, but it is usually the line of sight between subjects featured in a scene. Once the line is determined, a working space of 180 degrees (the gray semicircle) is established. For any scene or sequence, only camera positions within the established semicircle are permitted. The result is that the screen direction of any shots obtained from one side of the line will be consistent with each other. This is illustrated in Figure 6.7, which shows the shots obtained with cameras A, B and C of Figure 6.6. Camera positions that are outside the gray working space are said to be *across the line* or *over the line*. Figure 6.8 shows what happens if we edit shots from both sides of the line together, in this case, cameras A and F. The result is that the man is looking at the back of the woman's head.

### The Triangle System

When the line of action is in use, another convention, the triangle system of camera placement, is a shorthand way of describing camera positions on one side of the line. The system proposes that all the basic shots possible for any subject can be taken from three points within the 180-degree working space. Connecting the three points, we have a triangle of



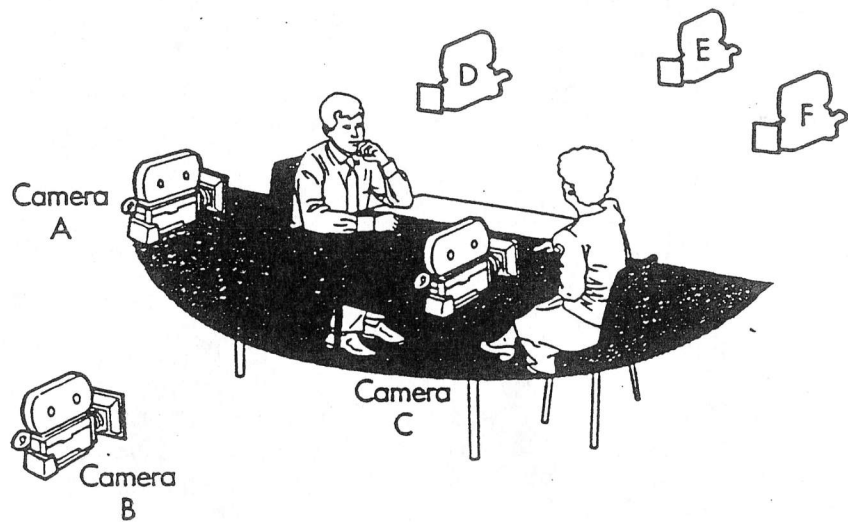


Figure 6.6

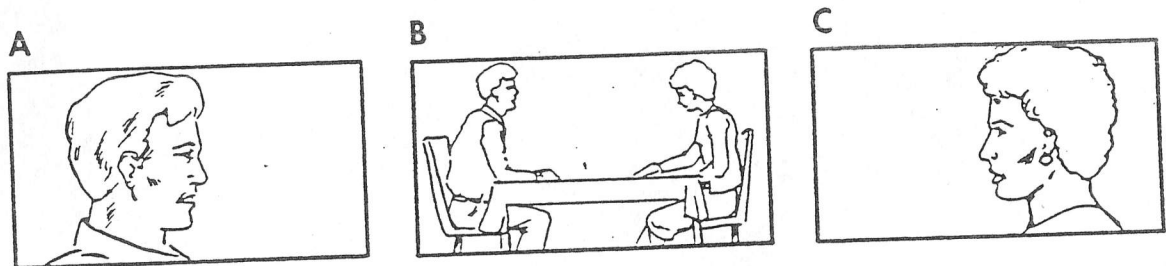


Figure 6.7

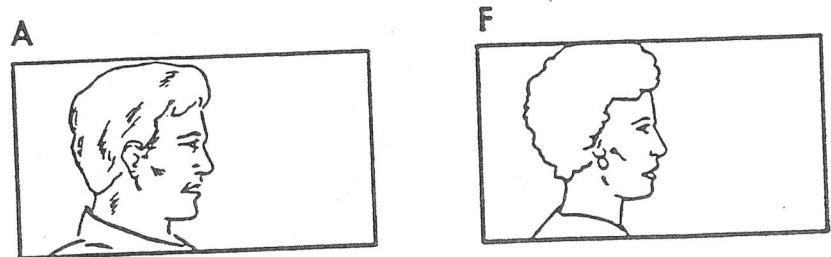


Figure 6.8

variable shape and size depending on the placement of the cameras. Any shot can be joined to any other shot in the triangle system of setups. The system includes all the basic shot sizes and camera angles used for dialogue scenes in the continuity style. The triangle system is employed for all types of situations, including single subjects and action scenes. It is used extensively for live television programs such as quiz shows, sports programs and sit-coms. Even though three cameras are pictured in the

following examples, a single camera can be moved to each point along the triangle and the different setups obtained individually. This is often the case in feature films. However, the triangle system lends itself to the multiple camera setup as long as extensive staging or camera movement is not required. This would create the problem of one camera moving in front of another. There are five basic camera setups that can be obtained within the triangle: Angular singles (medium shots or close-ups), master two-shots, over-the-shoulder shots, point-of-view singles (medium shots or close-ups) and profile shots.

In Figure 6.9, camera positions A and C are angular shots of the two subjects seated at the table. Position B is a two-shot. The framings accompanying each camera position, of course, could be varied, and the shot size for cameras A and C can be any size from an extreme close-up to a full shot.

Figure 6.10 is the second triangle setup for over-the-shoulder shots. Cameras A and C are moved into the over-the-shoulder position. Camera

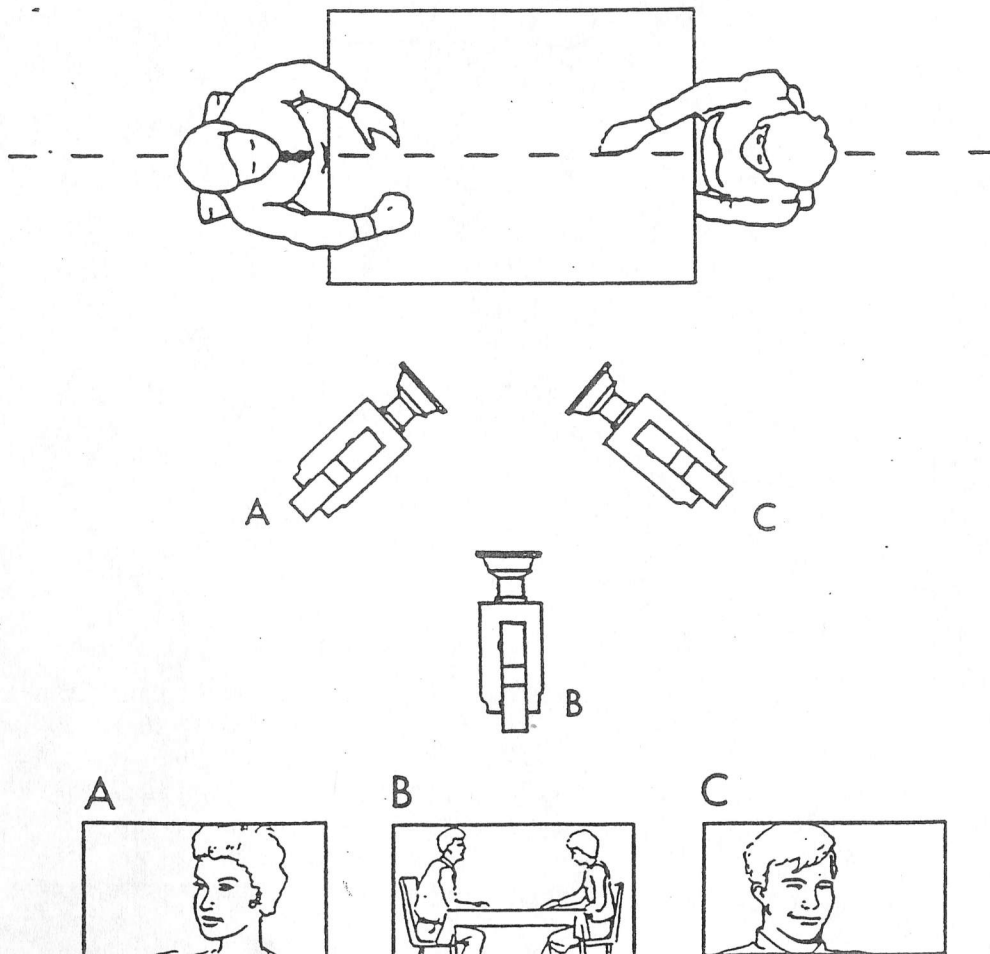


Figure 6.9

B always obtains the two-shot as in Figure 6.9 and so is not included in the subsequent examples. Variations are only obtained with the outside or wing camera positions.

### OVER-THE-SHOULDER SHOTS

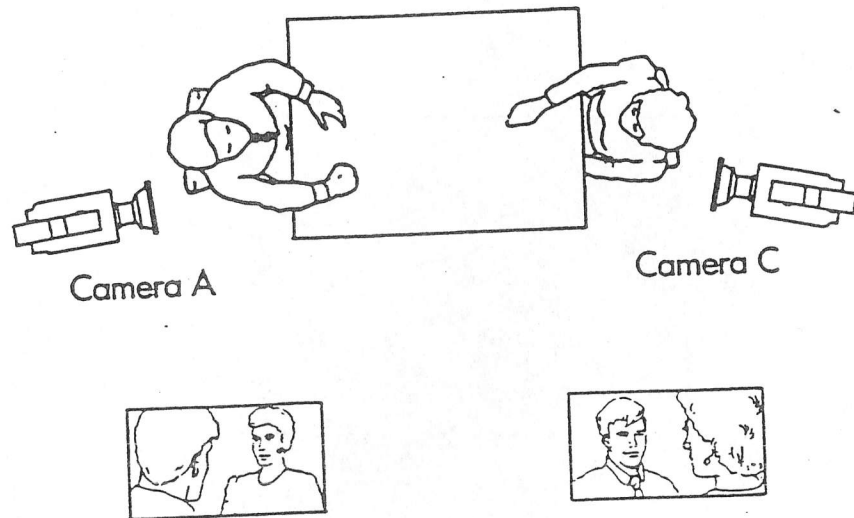


Figure 6.10

In the setup pictured in Figure 6.11, cameras A and C have been moved just inside the line of action or, more appropriately, the line of sight of the subjects. Camera positions A and C are now used to obtain close-ups from each subject's point of view. In this case, the subject not

### POINT OF VIEW CLOSE-UPS

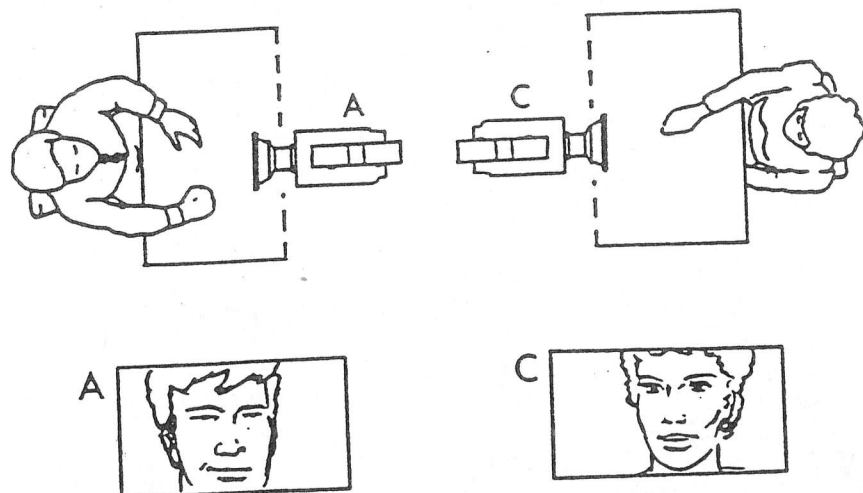


Figure 6.11



being photographed would be moved out of the way to place the camera in position. This is indicated by the broken line.

Figure 6.12 shows the last possible setup within the triangle method—profile shots using cameras A and C. Naturally, the exact angle of the shot, composition and shot size are infinitely variable within the triangle as long as the line of action is not violated.

### PROFILE SHOTS

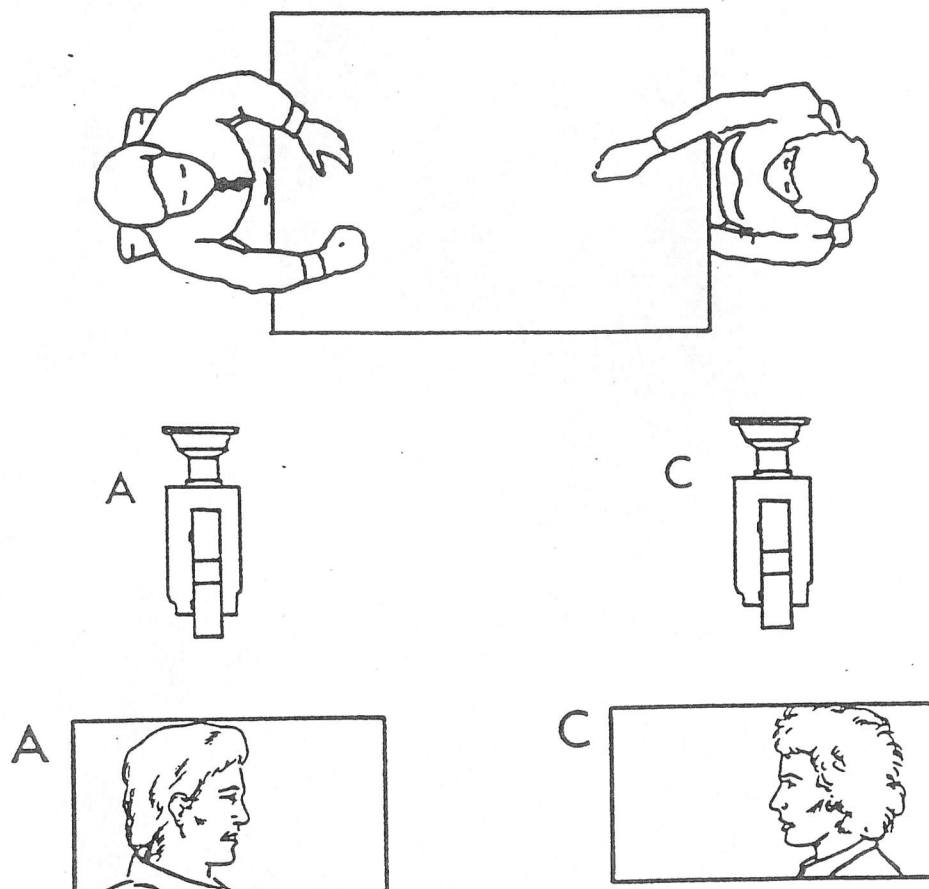


Figure 6.12

### Establishing a New Line of Action With a New Sight Line

The only time the camera is permitted to cross the line of action is when a new line is established. One way to do this is shown in Figure 6.13. In this example, the old line is established between the couple seated at the table. A second man approaches the table and the seated man turns his attention to him. This new line of sight establishes a new line of action and a corresponding 180-degree working space for the camera. This is indi-

## ESTABLISHING A NEW LINE

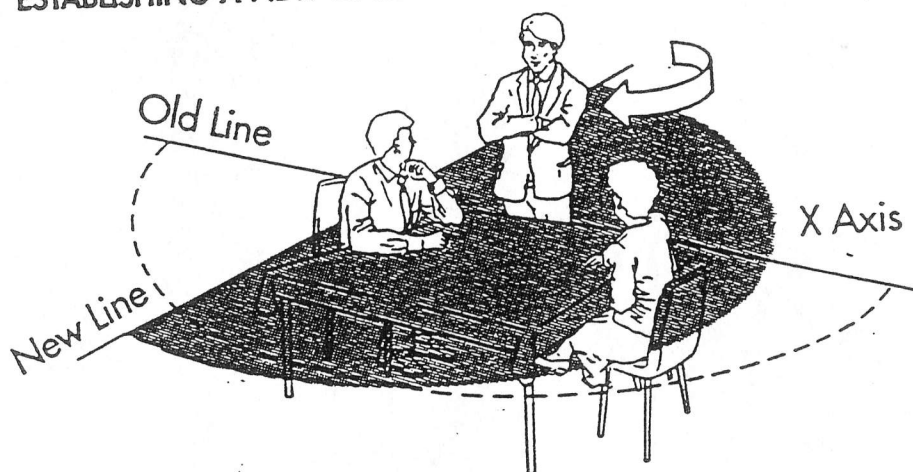


Figure 6.13

cated by the gray semicircle. The establishment of a new line is usually set up with a shot of a person who turns his attention to a new area or person within the frame. This *pivot shot* joins the two lines of action.

Once the new line of action has been set up, the camera can move across the old line of action anywhere within the new working space *as long as the sight line remains with the two men*. You will notice that this space also includes the woman. Even though it is permissible under the 180-degree rule, a camera will not be placed in quadrant X to photograph the woman. The next time she is seen in a shot, the camera will be located according to the *old line of action*. This is called a *reestablishing shot*. Conventional wisdom advocates reusing lines of action and the corresponding camera setups so that a consistent sense of space is reinforced through repetition. Once the basic editing pattern (and shot geography) has been established, a return to an old line of action does not have to be motivated by the pivot shot since the viewer has a general sense of the spatial relationships between actors.

The business of changing lines is considerably less complicated in practice. The shooting plan is arranged so that all the shots from a given angle are consolidated even if dialogue is shot out of order. Later, the shots are edited into the proper dramatic sequence. On screen, the changing line of action may appear to follow a far more complex scheme than was actually the case.

### Establishing a New Line When a Player Crosses the Line

A second method of establishing a new line is to have one of the players in a scene cross his own line of action. This is shown in Figure 6.14 on page 136. As before, the line of action is between the seated couple; the working space for the camera is on the near side of the line (A). In Step One, the actor gets up from the table and moves to a new position over the line into

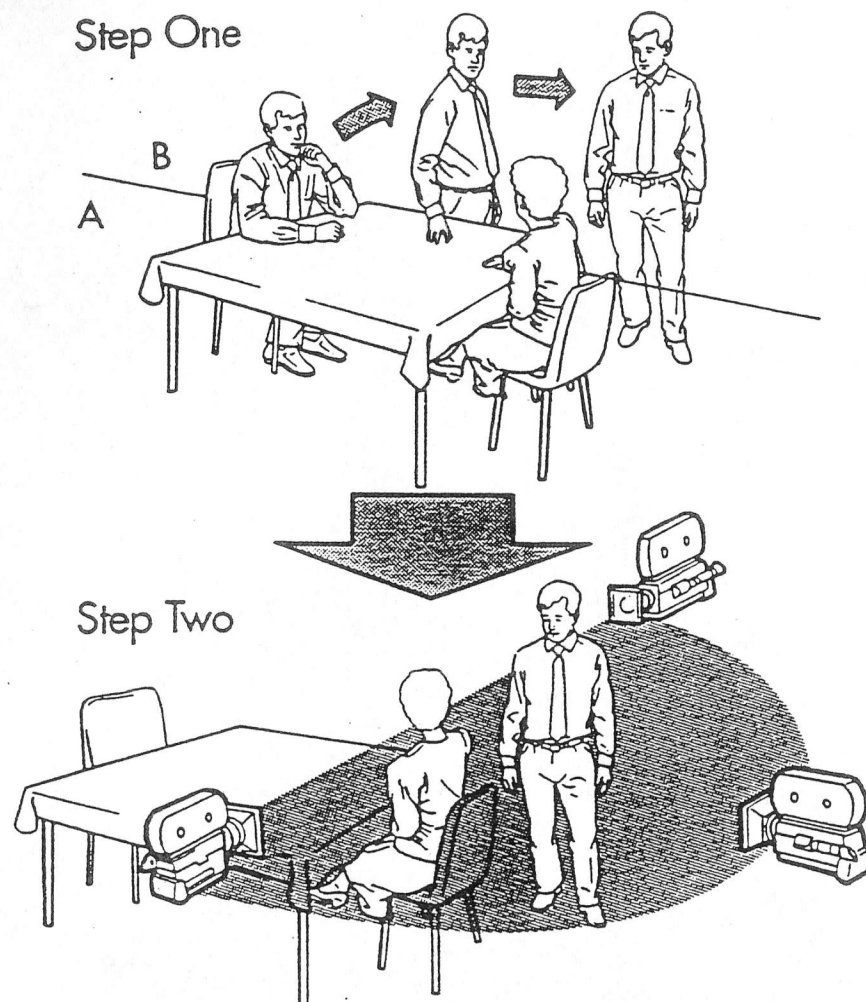


Figure 6.14

space B. As soon as the man reestablishes eye contact with the woman in Step Two, the new line of action is established. The new line overrules the old line, which is no longer in effect. Again, a working space of 180 degrees is created. The only requirement for this strategy is that the actor's relocation must be seen clearly in a shot that permits the viewer to reorient himself.

Another factor to consider when establishing any new line is which side to use for the camera. Figure 6.15 on page 137 illustrates an alternative setup to the one in Figure 6.14. This time the working space for the camera is on the opposite side of the line. *Either choice is permissible as long as the new space agrees with the pivot shot taken from the previous line of action.* This is shown in Figure 6.16. Part One shows the line of action and corresponding semicircular working space for the camera. The line bisecting the semicircle is the new line of action that will be established when the

## ALTERNATIVE WORKING SPACE

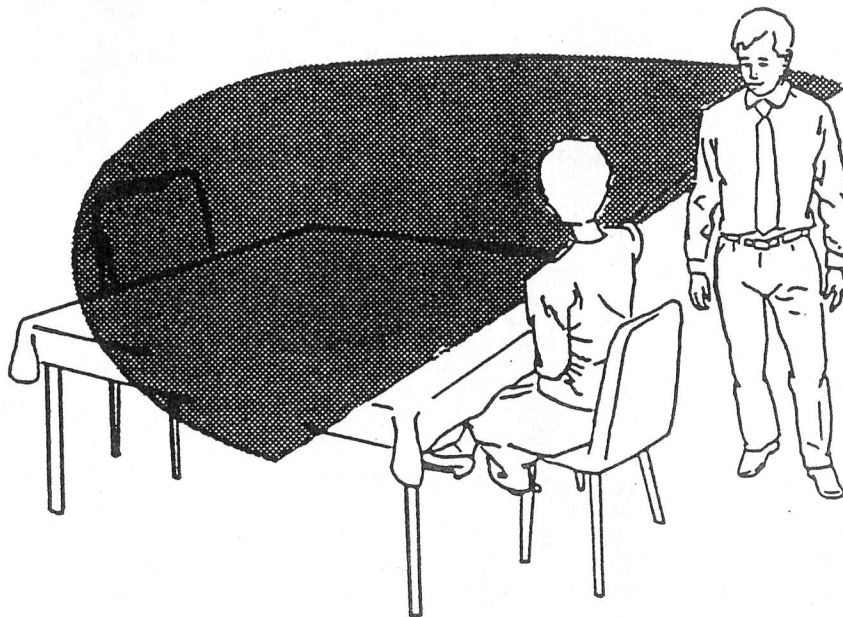


Figure 6.15

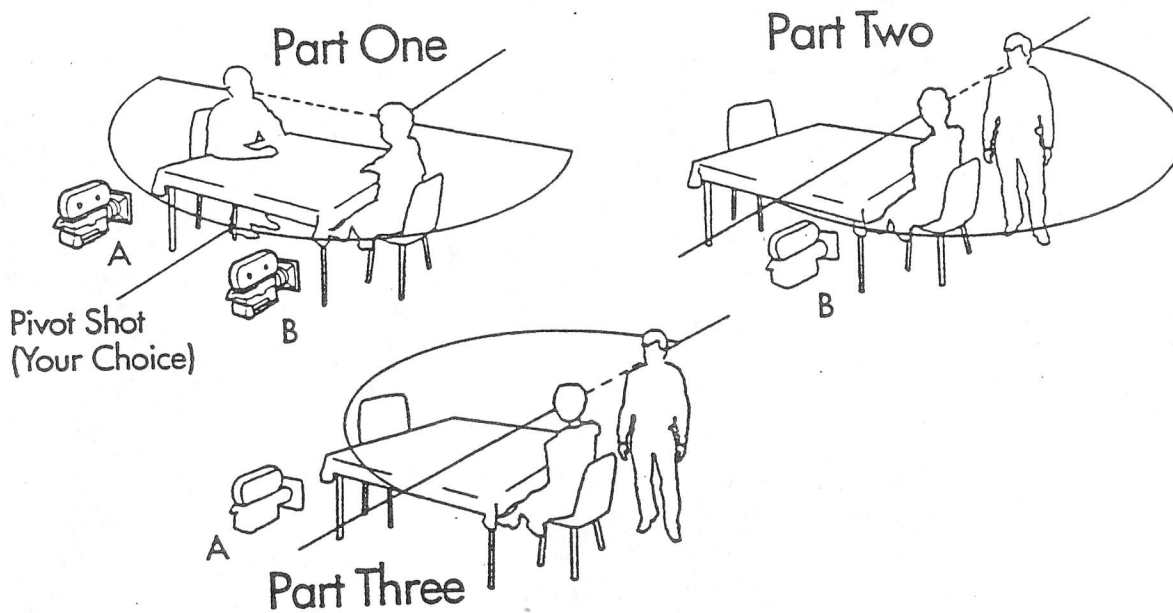


Figure 6.16

man moves to the standing position to face the woman. Cameras A and B represent the choices for the pivot shot used to record the man as he moves to the new position. Part Two of the diagram shows the 180-degree working space that you would use if camera position B were used

for the pivot shot. Part Three shows the 180-degree working space if camera position A were used for the pivot shot.

As a rule, the working area chosen for each new line of action keeps the camera in the center of the group when shooting dialogue situations at a table or in a confined space.

### Moving the Camera Over the Line

Not only can a player cross the line and establish a new one, but the camera can pan, dolly or make a crane move to a new space and a new line of action. This is easily accomplished as long as the camera movement is uninterrupted. In this situation, an eyeline does not have to be established and the camera can move from one side of the line of sight between two players to the other without confusion. Figure 6.17 shows

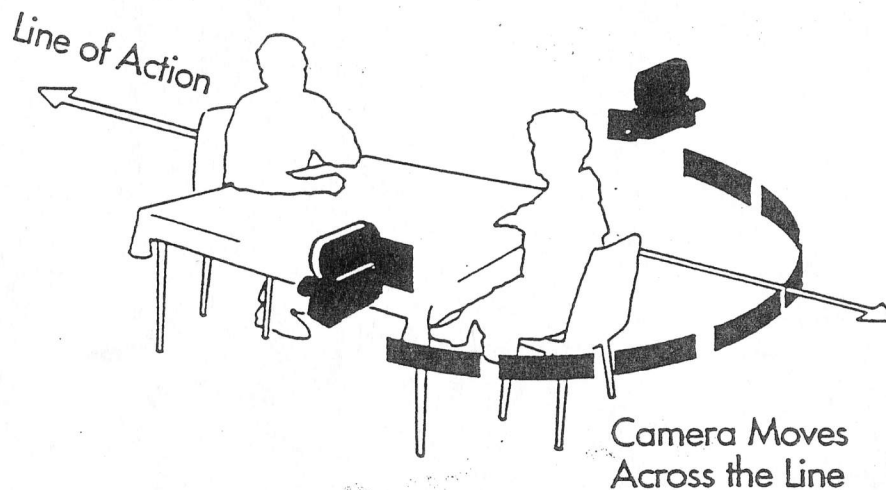


Figure 6.17

one version of this strategy with a curved camera path (black dotted line) crossing the line of action.

### Cutaways and Bridge Shots

Another way to cross the line to another part of the scene is to interrupt the geography of a sequence with a shot that is clearly related to the action, but not the geography of the scene. For instance, let's say that we have established the line of action in a scene in the classroom of a school. We want to cross the line, but none of the strategies we have looked at in previous examples will work within the action of the scene. In this case, we photograph a close-up of a student's notebook or other pertinent detail. This cutaway serves the same purpose as the pivot shot. When we return to the main action, the camera can be moved over the line and a



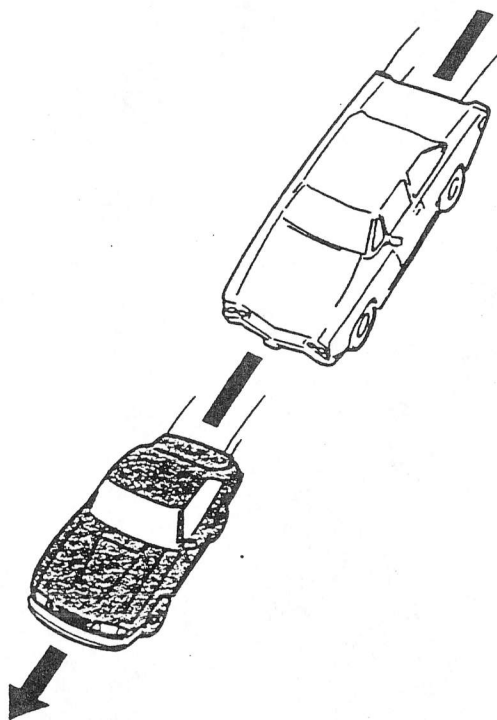


Figure 6.18: Line of action follows direction of motion.

new line established. This solution is generally used as a quick fix in the editing process when problems of continuity arise.

### The Line of Action for Moving Subjects and Action

In my opinion, the line of action is most useful when used to organize the photography of multiple-player dialogue sequences. Though screen direction would seem to be crucial to understanding the relationship of fast moving subjects—for instance, cars in a chase sequence—unquestioning observance of the line of action may actually stand in the way of more interesting arrangements of shots. For one thing, continuity editing is not the only way of organizing film images: Other methods, such as kinetic or analytical editing, may be in conflict with strict continuity and yet provide better solutions to creative problems. For another, today's viewers are so visually sophisticated that they are able to "read" unconventional editing patterns with relative ease. Be aware that more dynamic results may be obtained in some sequences if the line is crossed and screen direction is reversed. Later we'll be looking at other types of editing more closely, but for now, as we continue to

explore the line of action, keep in mind that there are alternative ways of organizing shots.

### Action Sequences

In action sequences there is frequently no line of sight to establish the line of action. In this case, the line of action follows the dominant motion of the subject of the shot. If one car is pursuing another, the line is the path of the cars, as shown in Figure 6.18. If the two cars are alongside each other, an *additional* line of action can be established between the cars. I call this the *implied sight line* because even when the drivers of the cars are not prominent in the shot, the cars become the symbols of the drivers and their line of sight. This situation is peculiar to cars, boats, planes or any other conveyance that has a driver. Both lines are shown in Figure 6.19. Shots photographed from both sides of the line of motion (camera positions A, C and B, D) will result in a reversal of screen direction when cut together, as shown in the accompanying storyboard panels. The implied sight line is a special case and only overrides the line of motion temporarily. Otherwise, the line of motion is the prevailing rule. While this may seem like the type of situation that the 180-degree rule was devised to prevent, it is actually a common editing pattern even in dialogue scenes where there is a line of motion and an implied sight line.

This is the case in *The Godfather Part II* when the young Vito Corleone

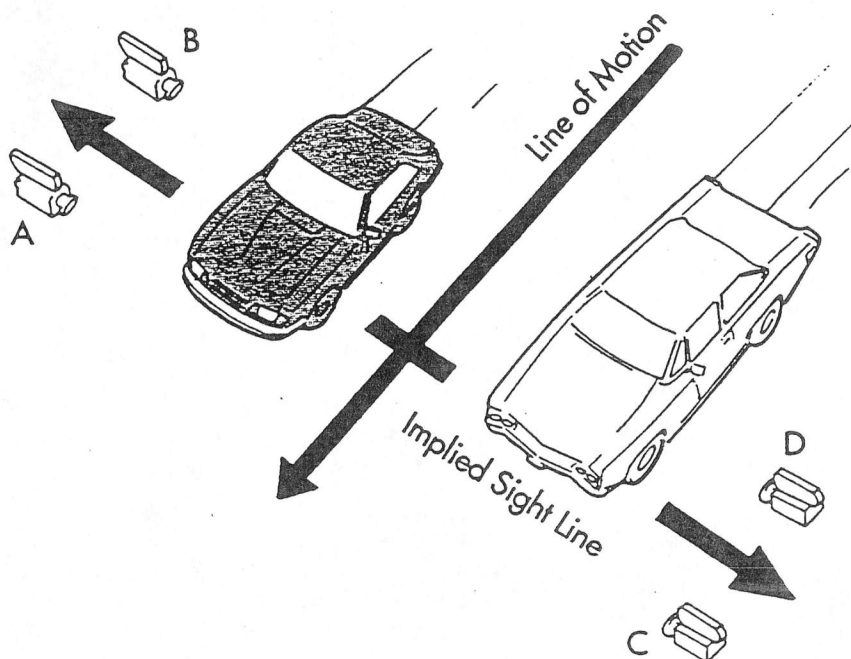
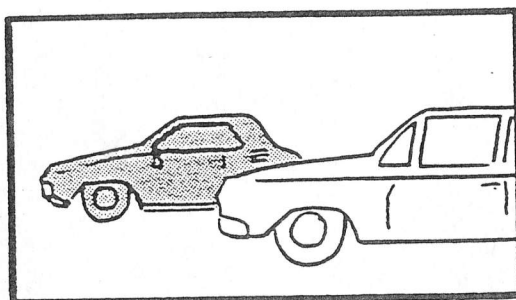
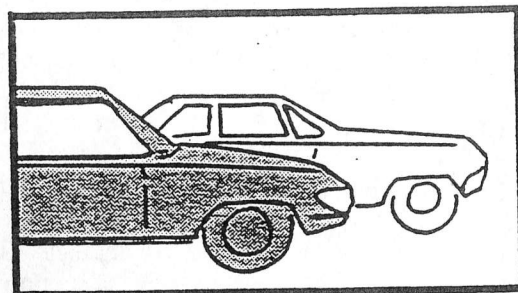


Figure 6.19, Part 1: Two possible lines of action.



SHOT FROM CAMERA POSITION C



SHOT FROM CAMERA POSITION A

Figure 6.19, Part 2

is driving a small truck along crowded New York streets. Fanucci, the local crime lord, is seated next to Vito, and they have a conversation as the car moves along. Two tracking shots are used, one on each side of the car, framing a good deal of the car and the moving background. Cut

together the shots form a pair of very wide over-the-shoulder shots. Each time there is a cut during the conversation, the background reverses direction. The abruptness of the cut could have been softened if the shots were tighter, so that Vito and Fanucci filled the frame. As it turns out, the shot change is not bothersome and so stands as an example of the latitude possible within the 180-degree rule.

### Crossing the Line in Action Sequences

The strategies for "properly" crossing the line in nondialogue situations are essentially the same as those illustrated for dialogue scenes, beginning with Figure 6.13, page 135. The only difference is that the principal line of motion is substituted for the sight line. To recap, there are three basic ways to establish a new line of action/motion:

- 1) A subject (car, horse, person, etc.) can cross the line establishing a new one by the direction of his new line of motion.
- 2) The camera can cross the line either following a subject to a new scene space or merely traveling for graphic variety to a new viewpoint.
- 3) A new subject can enter the frame and become the dominant line of motion in contrast to the first. This is analogous to the situation in Figure 6.13 when a new character entered the scene establishing a new line of sight.

### Crossing the Line While on the Line

The closer the camera is to the line of action, the more difficult it is to detect when the camera has crossed the line. In Figure 6.20 camera positions A and B are on the line of action, so when they are edited together there is a reversal of screen direction. This type of sequence would probably have been avoided 60 years ago; but today, audiences have no problem understanding the geography of the scene space in this editing pattern. This reversal is somewhat more startling than is sometimes the case when shooting on the line since the subject is in profile. When the subject's sight line is the same as the line of action, we get front and back views, which help the viewer differentiate the shots.

When actually filming, it usually turns out that it is rarely necessary to go through elaborate staging and logistical analysis to find a way of establishing a new line of action. My basic belief is that if the filmmaker has a solid understanding of cinematic geography, has a good overview of the scene, has kept thorough notes on what he is going to shoot and has already shot, then he will probably not encounter any major difficulties with continuity:

### Conclusion

The 180-degree rule is only a rule if you accept it without question. My

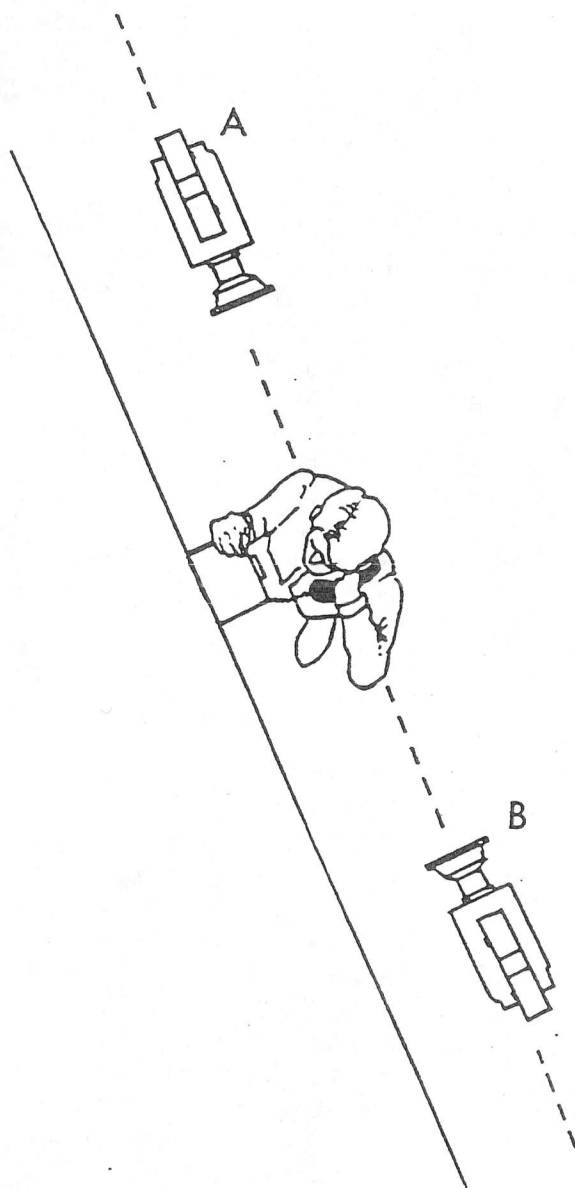


Figure 6.20, Part 1: The line of action. When edited together, shots obtained with cameras A and B reverse screen direction.

own feeling is that many of its assumptions are overstated. Audiences have turned out to be far more astute in understanding the spatial relationships in films than they are generally given credit for. Directors like Ozu, Bresson and Dreyer developed narrative techniques that frequently violate the conventions of continuity filmmaking to achieve their aims. While demanding in other respects, the viewer is not confused by their visual styles. Unlike Godard and the radical film movement, these direc-

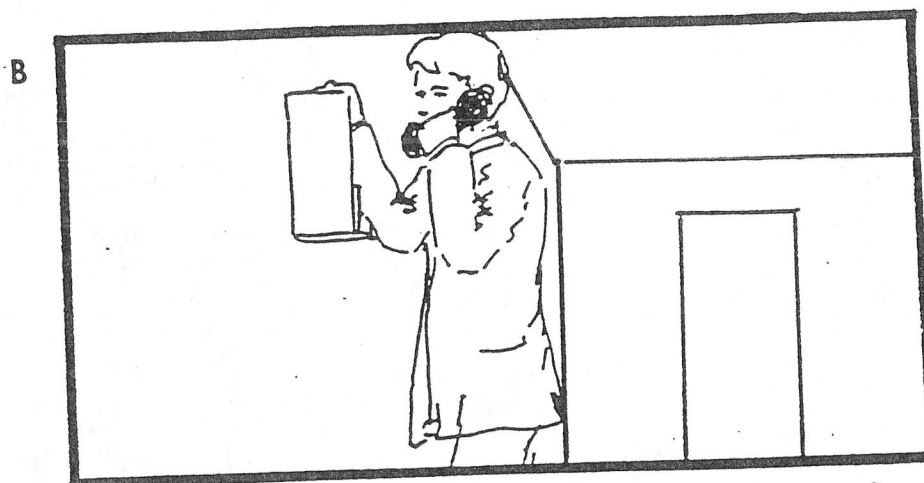
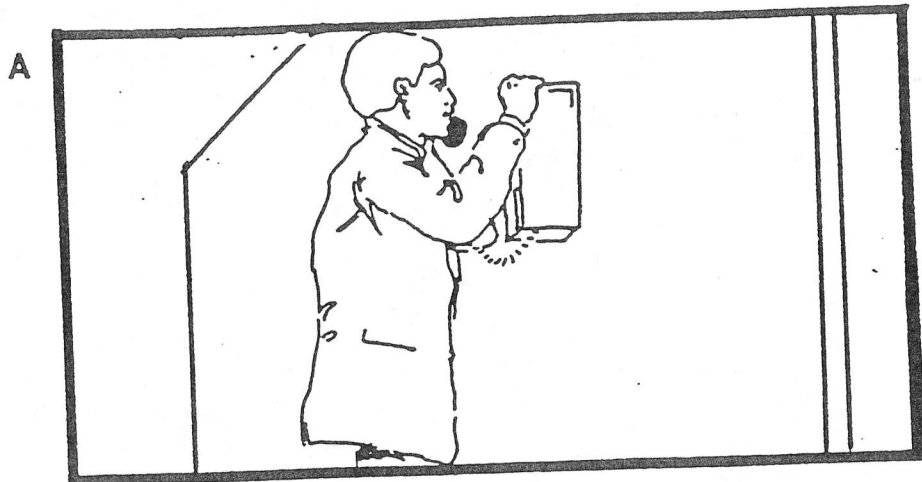


Figure 6.20, Part 2: The line of action. Any of the camera positions shown above can be edited together without disorienting the viewer.

tors were not reacting against the continuity style, and their visual solutions to thematic concerns are more varied and particular than the often mannered style of the left.

Ten years ago a defense of the line of action would have been considered reactionary, dismissed out of hand by virtually every film movement outside of mainstream features. It is probably still too soon for a fair reevaluation of the continuity style. But after four decades of concentrated criticism on the left analyzing the limitations of traditional narrative technique, it might restore some balance to the argument to state my own view that no style of filmmaking is superior to any other. If you feel that a particular style, or combination of styles, is appropriate to your work, there is no reason not to experiment. If anything is true of the arts, it is that there are no rules.



# 9 STAGING DIALOGUE SEQUENCES

**W**hen staging dialogue scenes for the camera, the director must fulfill two goals: the honest expression of human relationships and the presentation of these relationships to the viewer. The first goal is determined by the script and the actor's performance. The second goal is determined by staging, cinematography and editing. On the set, however, the director often finds that the actor's process and the practical and dramatic requirements of the camera are at odds. There is no right or wrong solution to this classical opposition, only what works best for the filmmaker in a given situation.

The visual challenge of staging is essentially a spatial problem—the ability to predict in three-dimensional space what will work on a two-dimensional screen. The spatial effect of a filmed sequence is particularly difficult to visualize because it is comprised of so many different fluid elements, such as the changing composition of the filmed image when the camera or the subject is in motion. Only a few dozen directors in the history of narrative film have exercised a recognizable staging style, and it remains a peculiarly elusive skill to acquire. The challenge is made more difficult by the lack of opportunities for practicing the craft.

## A Method for Visualizing Staging

In the arts, technique is largely a matter of improved perception. In music, for example, this means learning to hear more accurately; in film it means learning to see more precisely. Specifically, cinematic "vision" relies on spatial memory and recognition, skills that can be learned and refined. This will be our goal in the next several chapters.

First, we will need a basic vocabulary of shots and actor placement. Any system of construction will suffice provided the filmmaker uses its elements consistently. For our purpose, the Hollywood continuity style offers a familiar set of solutions that can be broken down into a system of building blocks. This programmed approach, however, is not simply intended to offer stock solutions. By knowing the basic ways in which people position themselves in conversation and the accompanying camera setups used to record them, you will have a secure base from which to improvise, break rules and take creative risks, while fulfilling your basic responsibility to the actors, the script and your personal vision.

This spatial approach is made up of five basic areas:

Staging stationary actors

Staging moving actors

Using the depth of the frame  
Staging camera movement  
Staging camera movement and actor movement together

The first building blocks we'll look at are staging patterns for two subjects. In the photoboard examples camera angles, lenses and editing patterns will be compared so that you can see how slight adjustments alter our understanding of a scene. Once the staging patterns for two subjects are established, we can apply these same general principles to three- and four-subject situations in subsequent chapters.

Before getting to the actual examples, we should first look at some of the basic staging conventions found in narrative film with the understanding that they represent the starting point for new ideas rather than the limits of what is permissible.

## Frontality

This is a basic convention of Western art. Frontality is just a way of saying that the subjects of a picture tend to face the viewer or, in the case of film, the camera. Many staging arrangements in the movies are basically frontal, meaning that subjects in conversation tend to face the camera rather than each other. This type of body positioning is not without precedence in real life, but in films it is often adjusted to the camera's needs.

A scene that stages actors in a frontal position can be recorded in a single master shot. If, however, one of the actors is turned away from the camera (partially or completely) more than one camera angle is necessary to see both actors' faces. This represents the two major editing approaches to staging: one in which the actors face a single camera setup and the other in which multiple camera viewpoints are edited together.

## The Master Shot

The master shot is the one shot that is wide enough to include all the actors in the scene and that runs for the entire length of the action. When directors speak of the master, they usually mean that it is part of a plan of coverage that includes other camera setups in the triangle system that will eventually be edited together. But there are also times when the master shot is the only shot the director feels is necessary.

## The Sequence Shot

Normally, the camera remains motionless in the master shot, particularly if cutting to other camera angles is anticipated. If the master is a moving shot, the camera is fluidly repositioned with a dolly throughout the course of the scene, essentially combining several camera angles that in an edited sequence would be obtained by individual shots. This approach to staging is also called the sequence shot and usually employs movement of the actors along with the traveling camera. Generally speaking, the sequence shot respects frontality more than an edited sequence. This is because editing

permits, and routinely links, shots that are opposed by as much as 180 degrees. The equivalent change in a sequence shot is very nearly impossible to do quickly, let alone repeatedly. Therefore, the moving camera in a dialogue sequence shot tends to maintain a general viewing direction. We will look at this more closely in the chapter on mobile blocking.

### **Shot Size and Distance**

One version of the master shot, the medium two-shot, was so characteristic of American films of the '30s and '40s that the French call it the "plan Americain" or the American shot. In the early '30s the two-shot was used to cover entire dialogue sequences without resorting to close-ups. This was due in part to the advent of sound in pictures and the long stretches of dialogue that accompanied them. The cumbersome blimped cameras were less mobile than the cameras used for silent films and the two-shot reduced the need to move the camera. This technical limitation was quickly overcome, but the two-shot remained in use for years because it was found to be a relaxed framing device for comedies and musicals.

Personally, I like the distance and objectivity that two-shot and full figure shots afford. The body can be wonderfully expressive, and people often use body language to indicate their relationship to others: for example, by where they stand in a room or by their different ways of approaching a rival, friend or lover. The way a person moves can be as distinctive as his or her voice, and most of us can identify a friend at a distance by some characteristic gesture long before we see his or her face. Expressive body movement falls within the range of the full shot and the medium shot. Entire scenes can be staged effectively at this distance without ever resorting to a close-up.

### **The Shot, Reverse Shot Pattern**

When players are seen in alternating close-ups, the shot, reverse shot pattern is one of the most useful solutions. No cutting strategy better represents the Hollywood style than this one. The popularity of this setup is that it offers the widest range of cutting options and includes two important advantages that the two-shot lacks. The first advantage is that we get to see a subject's isolated reaction to dialogue; the second is that the point of view changes within the scene. In addition, the eye-line match between one character and another helps to establish a sense of spatial unity.

### **Sight Lines and Eye Contact**

In any shot of one actor the closer the sight line is to the camera the more intimate our contact with the actor will be. In the most extreme case the actor can look directly into the lens and make eye contact with the viewer. This very confrontational relationship can be quite startling.

The most frequent use of direct eye contact is in subjective camera sequences in which the audience is made to see things through the eyes of one of the characters. This is relatively infrequent in narrative film and most

of the time dialogue scenes are shot with the sight lines of the actors slightly to the left or right of the camera. In this case, it is common practice to maintain the same distance from the camera for sight lines in alternating

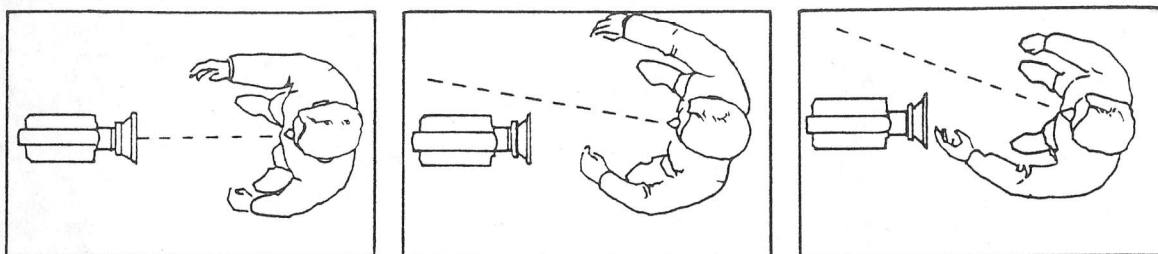


Figure 9.1

close-ups of two or more actors. Figure 9.1 is a comparison of setups for close-ups, each illustrating a different sight line relative to the camera.

Once you have acquired some feel for the psychological and dramatic implications of sight lines and eye contact, you will be able to make subtle shifts within a sequence for dramatic emphasis.

## The Staging System

Unless a director spends a great deal of time training himself to see all the possibilities of setup and actor placement, he usually relies on a few all-purpose strategies for any scene. If he allows his actors greater freedom, interesting new options may arise, but unless he has a solid command of staging for the camera, the production process will ultimately undermine his experimentation. The director will find himself at odds with the cinematographer and producer, who won't understand why he keeps restaging a scene, with the consequent loss of time and, frequently, the spontaneity of his cast.

The skill this director lacks is the ability to visualize the actors and camera in space, and the composition that will result from any combination of these elements. This is where the pattern system of staging comes in.

## Letter Patterns

The staging system we will be using from this point on identifies two categories of actor placement: pattern and position. We will discuss pattern first.

Pattern: There are three basic *patterns* of figure deployment in a frame. We will call them the "A," "I" and "L" patterns. These are the letters that grouped players resemble when viewed from above.

The significance of the patterns is that *they are the simplest arrangement of actors according to the line of action*. Therefore, staging patterns relate to camera placement.

As you can see on the following page, the A and L patterns require three or more players to complete the letter shape. The only arrangement for two subjects is the I pattern. Figure 9.2 illustrates all three patterns.



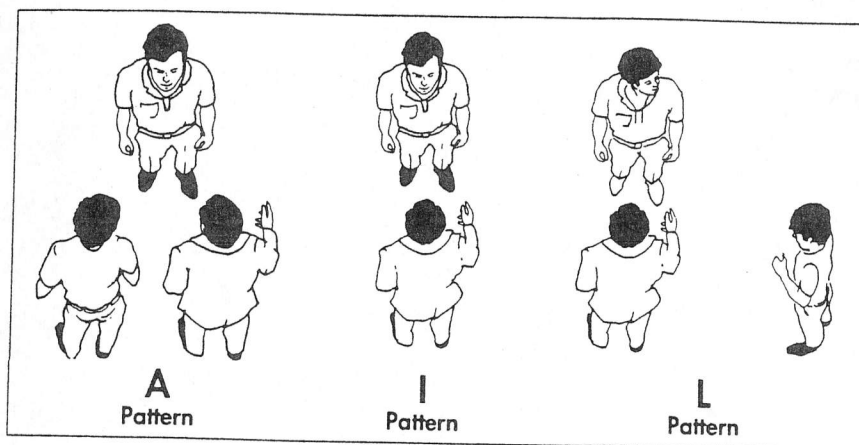


Figure 9.2: Patterns.

**Position:** This refers to the direction the subjects are facing within a pattern. For any given pattern there can be many positions.

Most importantly, position relates to the composition of the frame. This means that once the camera has been placed for a given pattern, the more subtle arrangement of the actors (the direction they face in the frame) is determined by their positions. An experienced director will consider pattern and position simultaneously, but in the beginning they are more easily understood as separate concepts. Three typical positions in the I pattern are shown in Figure 9.3.

One last point: **The I pattern for two players is the basic building block in our system.** This is because the line of action can be established between only two people at a time. When there are more than two people in a conversation, the line of action moves as explained in Chapter 6. This is good news since we will only have to learn the positions for two subjects

in order to apply them to larger groups. From the cameraman's point of view, the I pattern is found in the A and L patterns whenever a series of close-ups and singles are required.

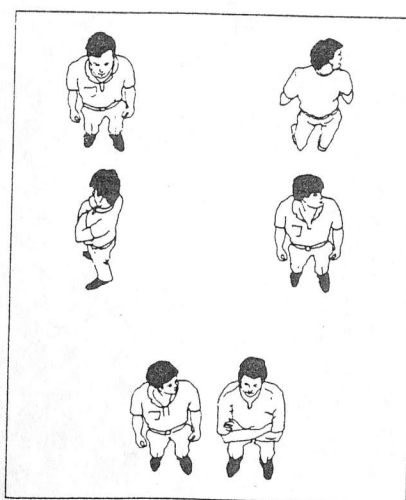


Figure 9.3: Positions. All the positions are in the I pattern.

### Staging Dialogue for Two Subjects

For the sake of clarity, most of the photoboards in this chapter are shot in simple surroundings staged for the static camera. Later, we'll see how camera movement or movement by the players can be substituted for cutting. For now, the camera is locked down and the photoboard sequences represent multiple camera angles that have been edited together.



## POSITION ONE

### Face-to-Face

The most basic positioning of two people in conversation is facing each other with their shoulders parallel. The first option is to frame the subjects in profile, as shown in the first six panels.

Compositionally, this staging allows for powerful subject oppositions. In this setup we do not get to see much of the players' expressions unless the composition is very tight (frame 6). If individual CUs are used the camera is usually repositioned for reverse OTS shots, although individual profile CUs are certainly possible.

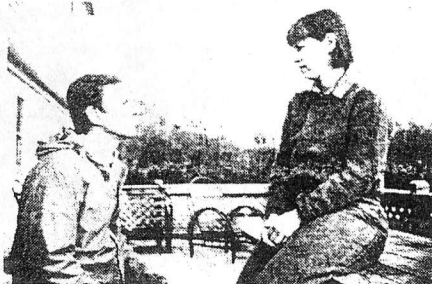
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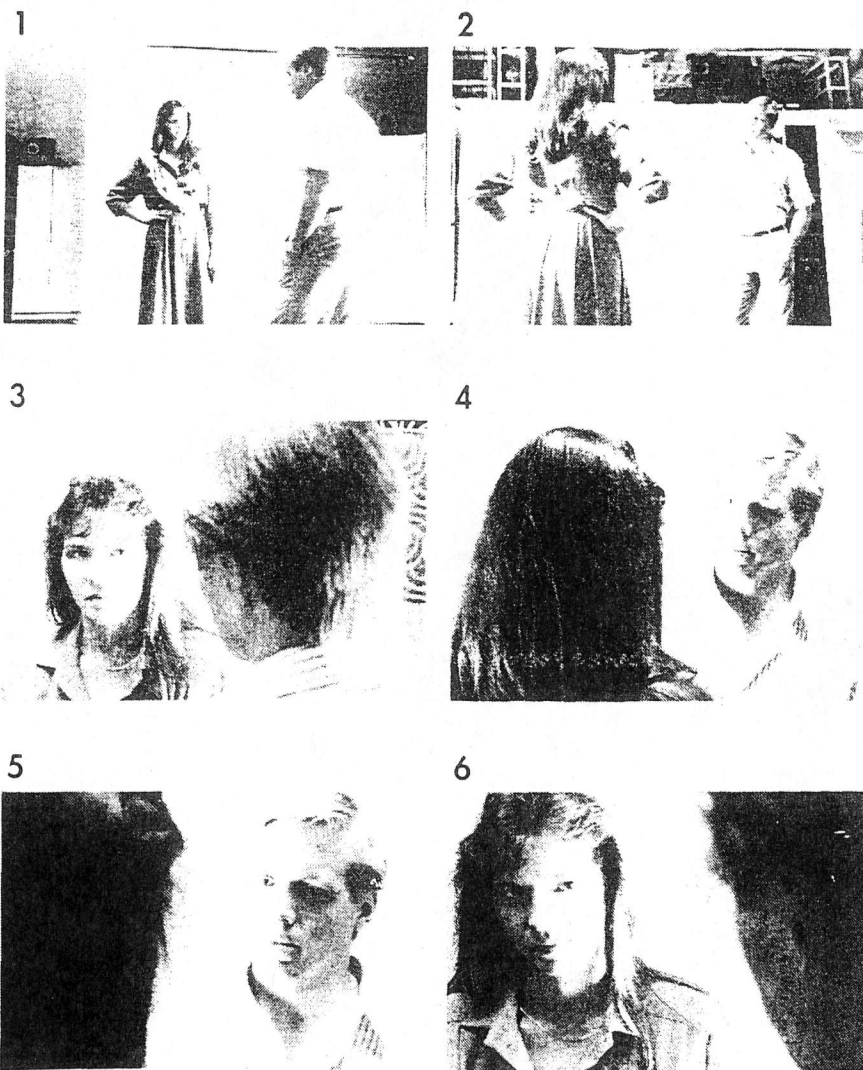


## POSITION ONE

### OTS

This next series shows the classic shot, reverse shot pattern in over-the-shoulder framings. These might be the logical follow-up shots to the profile stagings on the previous page. Though OTS shots are usually shot as matched pairs maintaining consistent lens and framing choices, mixed pairs can be edited together. In a continuous exchange of dialogue, however, matched pairs are more commonplace.

In tight framings there are two major strategies for the OTS shots. Frames 3 and 4 include the foreground subject's entire head in the frame. In frames 5 and 6 virtually one third to one half of the frame is blocked off, strongly isolating the player facing us.



## POSITION ONE

### LOW-ANGLE REVERSE SHOTS

Another version of the shot, reverse shot pattern of Position One is seen in this next series, which can be described as over-the-hip shots. These are dynamic, low-angle positions that tend to put the subjects in an adversarial relationship. Frames 1 and 2 are only slightly low-angle and do not separate the subjects as much as do frames 3 and 4, which are shot from a camera height of 3 ft. In frames 5 and 6, the focal length of the lens is increased (100mm) to lose focus on the foreground framing subject, thus emphasizing the background figure.

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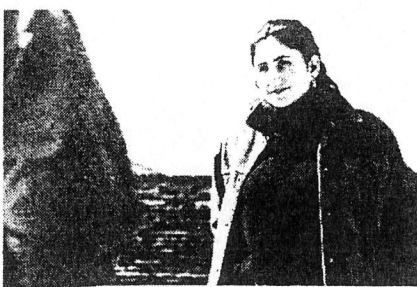
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## POSITION TWO

### Shoulder-to-Shoulder

This basically frontal positioning offers more options than most others because players can be seen full face or in profile in the same shot. In our example the subjects are faced forward, looking at a road map spread on the hood of the car, but when the couple speaks to one another they turn in profile to the camera.

Frames 1-3 are straightforward two-shots. Any of these could serve as a master shot, although frame 1 is somewhat wide for a conversation. Try to imagine a dialogue scene as you look at these frames. You will probably find that the size of the shot will affect what type of scene comes to mind. You can probably think of this as a reverse exercise since you will most often face the opposite situation: imagining a shot for a scene in a script.



Frames 4, 5 and 6 illustrate an actual sequence. We begin with the profile two-shot in frame 4 and move in to profile close-ups in frames 5 and 6. The camera would be moved in for the CUs, but it would still be directed along the same angle of view as for the open two-shot. (In my opinion, this use of CUs tends to break up the scene, though in the continuity style it's a perfectly legitimate cut.)



In frames 7-9 we open with the medium two-shot. This time we have replaced the CUs of the previous version with a profile two-shot by moving the camera around to the side and subsequently reversing to the OTS shot. Unfortunately, the framings don't fill the frame as much as I would like to see. If this were a storyboard I would know in advance that the shots should be tighter.



In this last series, frames 10-12, we begin with the master shot followed by two close-ups. This time we open with an angular two-shot. The camera is moved to the side for the shot, reverse shot CUs. Compare these with the two profile CU shots we used earlier in frames 5 and 6. Notice that these newer CUs give a stronger sense of presence. This happens because each subject in the CU is looking in our (the camera's) direction—in a sense, including us in the scene.





## POSITION THREE

This basic staging deploys the figures at an angle of 90 degrees. This is a compromise between the parallel shoulder arrangement of Position One and the shoulder-to-shoulder arrangement of Position Two. It is a more casual pose, not one you would expect to see if the couple were arguing or having an intimate conversation. The looser relationship allows the couple to look away from one another and vary their head positions.

In the angular two-shot shown in frames 1 and 2 the player facing the camera is in the favored position. This type of setup is similar to the OTS shots, and we expect to see a reverse of the player in the secondary position.

The head-on two-shot in frames 3 and 4 puts the players on an equal basis and so is the logical choice for a master shot if no close-ups or reverses are used. The alternative is to have the player in the secondary position turn towards the camera to obtain the equivalent of a reverse shot. As with any of the "I" patterns, OTSs and CUs can be used, although this tends to force the subjects into the more direct relationship of Position Two. One way of maintaining the angular positioning is by composing the two-shot very tightly and closing the space between the subjects. A shot, reverse shot version of this is shown in frames 5 and 6.

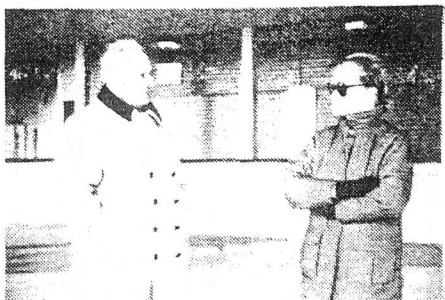
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## POSITION FOUR

Beginning with Position Four we will look at stagings that create tension. In all cases this is due to the absence of eye contact between the players. In this series, the woman has turned from her partner, and the sense of separation is clear. This type of framing puts the viewer in a privileged position because we can see what the man cannot: the woman's reactions to his words.

Staging in depth in this way clearly places us in a closer relationship with one of the players. This is a definite choice of point of view that depends on the basic frontality of the scene. A reverse shot in this staging would drastically alter the point of view. If a more neutral relationship with the players is desired, there are other, probably better, stagings that can be used. As you can see, I have not used any reverse shots with this staging, which is inherently frontal.

In frame 1 the two-shot is composed in depth with a 30mm lens. The result is that slight distortion can be seen in the foreground player and the player in the background seems far away even though the players are only separated by the length of a picnic table.

1



2



3



Frames 4, 5 and 6 present a slightly modified alternative. The opening two-shot is looser, allowing the viewer some breathing room. The close-up in frame 5 also has been made wider (almost a medium shot) to give the frame a more relaxed feeling. Frame 6 shows a lower angle close-up. Compare the feeling of this frame to frame 3 above. The result of these changes is that the sequence is less insistent.

4



5



6



## POSITION FIVE

This is another staging that tends toward separation and tension. The body language of the woman's folded arms and the man's hands in his pockets or on his hips contributes to the interpretation of the scene. The framing can be used to emphasize the dramatic situation but is essentially neutral as to which actor is dominant. In the version shown, the woman refuses to look at the man. This, of course, is a type of control, and we can imagine that the man is placed in a position of weakness. We could just as easily propose a scene in which the man is confronting the woman with some lie she has told. In this case the man would be in the dominant role.

We begin with a high angle in frame 1. This view usually serves to create tension and isolation. The open surroundings contribute to this feeling. The cut to the two-shot in frame 2 is a legitimate edit, but I would prefer to show the players separated more. The next sequence (frames 3 and 4) shows a pair of reversed angular shots.

1



2



3



4



In frames 5 and 6 we see a pair of tighter reverse shots. In these shots the framing combines a CU framing and a medium shot. The obvious difference is that frame 6 features both players' faces, while frame 5 is really an OTS shot.

If it is necessary to withhold the woman's expression we could frame the scene from the opposite side of the action in the previous frames. In this case we will be crossing the line of action.

This staging would open with the high-angle shot in frame 7, cross the line to frame 8, and cross the line one last time to frame 9. This type of staging and shot sequence is not at all typical of the continuity style, but that is largely due to the unchallenged orthodoxy of the 180-degree convention. Do not automatically rule out a shot simply because it means crossing the line. If it works, use it.

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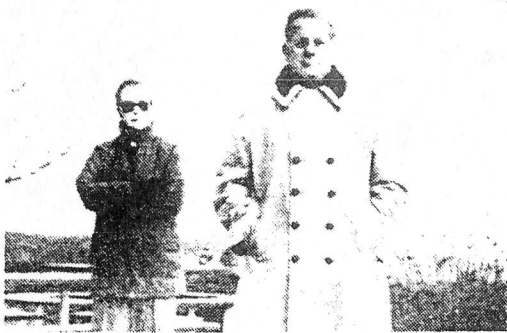


## POSITION SIX

This dramatic staging withholds eye contact for much of its effect. The value of this staging is its clarity, related in a sense to the shoulder-to-shoulder two-shot. The difference is that in-depth staging encourages us to identify with the foreground player. My feeling about this type of setup is that overcutting destroys the unity of the scene.

In frame 1 we see a wide shot of the setup, but frame 2 is probably the best distance for a master shot. In this type of staging the background player has room to move, pace, turn around or leave the frame momentarily, while the foreground player is restricted to a smaller space if both players are to remain within the frame. Frames 3 and 4 reveal the way in which identification can be controlled by placing us in an intimate relationship with the man. If cutting is used, the pair of close-ups in frames 5 and 6 retain the feeling of separation.

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## POSITION SEVEN

With this staging we continue the deployment of players who do not make eye contact. Because both players are looking offscreen in different directions, the viewer's attention is divided between the background and the foreground players. This produces an offhanded, relaxed dramatic situation. Notice that the background player is looking past the foreground player. This directs the viewer's attention to the foreground player and unifies the shot.

Consider this series a comparison of close-ups. The middle close-up of the man is a good example of how shot size contributes to the spatial unity of the sequence. Learn to move your eyes over the images without studying them. Reading a storyboard is a matter of editing with your eyes. This becomes easier when you have an actual scene to imagine.

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6



7



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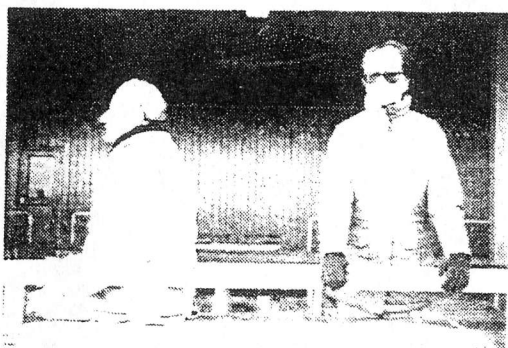
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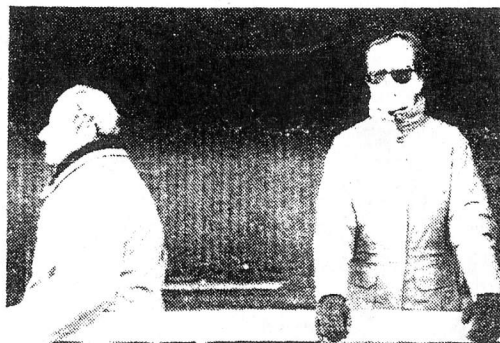
## POSITION EIGHT

This next version is a variation on the previous staging. As before, the players are in a right-angle relationship, but this time the background player is looking away from the other player. The three pairs of photos serve as a good example of the different ways in which the viewer's relationship to the players is determined. In frames 1 and 2 the woman facing us is favored slightly. As a general rule the player whose eyes are most clearly seen will dominate the shot. As we have seen before, in-depth staging encourages our identification with the foreground player. Finally, the angular shots in frames 5 and 6 tend to balance the attention of the figures since both players are turned away from the camera.

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## POSITION NINE

This series features a staging that has the players so completely opposed that it seems as though it belongs in a musical comedy. This is only true if we imagine that the players are aware of each other and have taken a defiant stance. We can change this very easily if we imagine that the scene is set on a railroad platform and that the man has been hired to follow the woman. The man moves into the crowd and stands with his back to her. In this case the staging would be suited to a thriller, not a comedy.

Comparing the stagings in frames 1 through 4 you will see that the somewhat stylized positioning in frames 1 and 2 is less artificial-looking as we move closer in frames 3 and 4.





Personally, I find frames 5-10 to be the most successful framings of this position. All six frames are evocative for the reason that the head turn indicates that the featured player is listening to something offscreen. In a sense this is an aural version of the cut on the look.

5



6



7



8



9



10



## POSITION TEN

The following three sequences record a staging in which the players are positioned at different heights. This usually means that tight two-shots are framed as up or down angles, though in wider framings this is not necessary. No reverse shots are shown in this series, though that is certainly a workable variation.

Spend some time looking at the shot flow in these sequences. Try "reading" the frames from right to left or diagonally across to produce different combinations. Any of these shots works with any other, but each presents a slightly different feeling and spatial sense. Developing the skill to predict relationships between shots in a sequence will help you in composing individual shots.

There are innumerable variations on two-player stagings that we have not looked at, but nearly all the possibilities will share the essential physical and emotional qualities of at least one of the positions illustrated. The point is not to memorize every conceivable arrangement of player and camera, but rather to sharpen your awareness of the relationship of the elements from which the dramatic qualities of a shot are composed.





# 10 DIALOGUE STAGING WITH THREE SUBJECTS

Now that we have looked at the 10 positions for the "I" pattern, we can add a third player to our stagings, which will make the "A" and "L" patterns possible. Remember, our system is based on three assumptions:

- The I pattern is the simplest building block. It is found in the A and L patterns.
- Patterns determine camera placement based on the line of action.
- Position determines the placement of players in the frame based on the basic staging pattern.

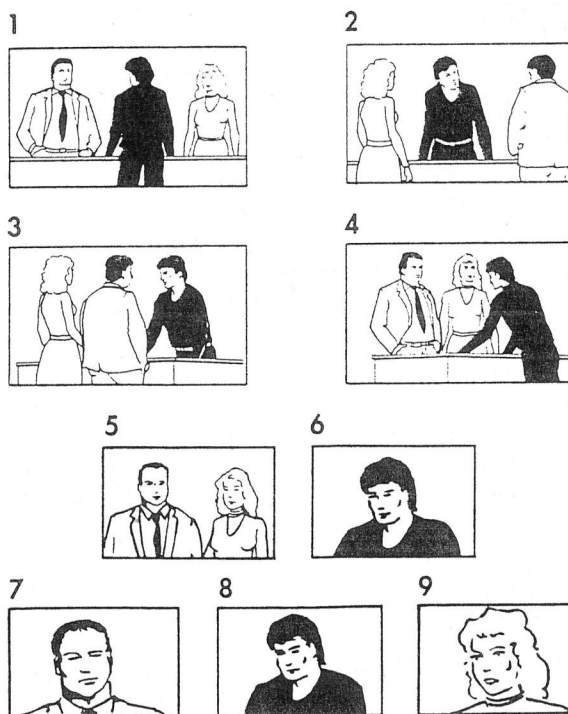
## The Difference Between A and L Patterns

Because actors are not always arranged in precise A or L alignment, it is not always easy to decide which pattern to apply. In this case camera placement is the determining factor.

For example, when lining up players for a three-shot you may find that

two players are facing the third player. If the third player is framed between the other two, then the staging arrangement is the A pattern. If the third player is lined up outside the other two players, then the arrangement is the L pattern. This aspect of staging is called *opposition*. Figure 10.1 shows the various types of oppositions that can be obtained.

Figure 10.1: Frames 1 and 2 show one subject opposed by two others. Since the lone figure in black is flanked by the other two, this is an A pattern. Frames 3 and 4 show the alternative setup for the three-shot in which the lone subject is isolated to one side. This is an L pattern. Frames 5 and 6 illustrate the type of opposition that can be obtained if we break down the three-shot into a two-shot opposed by a one-up. In frames 7 and 8 all the players are equally opposed in one-up.



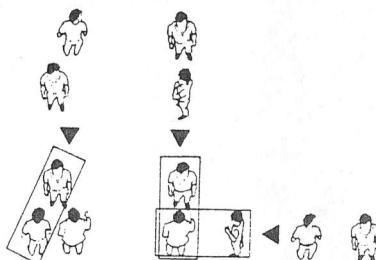
## The Basic Patterns and Positions

In the two-player stagings of the previ-

ous chapter, the models in the photoboards were arranged in open space. Having established the basic positions in those examples we can look at stagings that are less precisely aligned.

By adding the additional player we have increased the number of pattern and position combinations enormously. We do not need to look at all of them since we know that any combination can be reduced to the 10 positions in the I pattern that we have already seen. Conversely, we can reverse the process and construct dozens of three-player stagings from the 10 positions. This idea is shown in Figure 10.2.

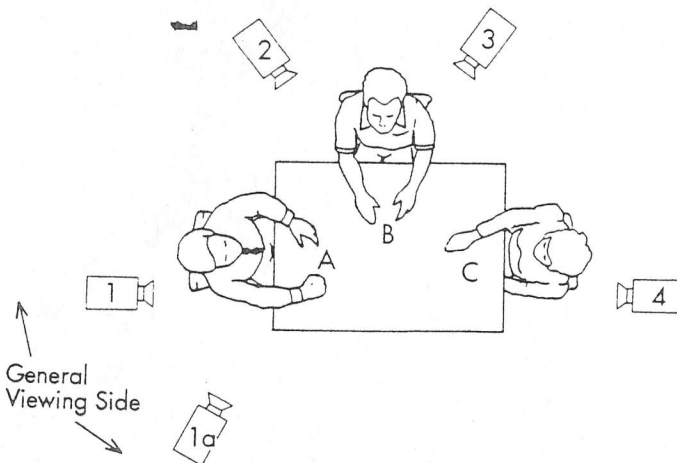
Figure 10.2: Here we see the boxed portion of the A and L patterns being replaced by the two alternate positions in the I pattern at the top of the figure. The box could just as easily be drawn horizontally or diagonally as long as two players are enclosed in the box.



Before looking at the photoboard examples, we can review the line of action as it pertains to three-player scenes. Figure 10.3 shows a typical staging situation in the A pattern.

Figure 10.3: In this A pattern staging I first determined the general angle of view. Although the camera can move 360 degrees around the players, the scene should have a basic viewing orientation. The circumstances vary with the scene, but in this case the scene opens with a view from camera 1. The dialogue begins between players a and c. This establishes the line between them. Camera positions 1 and 2 for OTS shots are placed *outside* the line.

Now player b speaks to player c, establishing a new line between them. On what side of the line do we place the camera? This is where the general view comes in. Rather than set up a new camera position *outside* of players a and b, as we did for players a and c, we stay on the same side of player a. Now when player b speaks to player c we stay on the same side of player b and use camera position 2. What about camera position 3? Do we actually need this angle? With the number of angles we already have, it may be unnecessary. This example can be handled in other ways, but the general idea is to reuse positions when possible rather than constantly creating new ones whenever a new line is established.



In the following examples we will consider some common and some not so common staging situations with three players.

### A Pattern (Version One)

Here is the same staging situation we just looked at in Figure 10.3. Frame 1 is the only combination of setup and staging for this pattern that permits us to see all the subjects clearly. This makes it the obvious choice for a master shot.

In the first series of frames (2-5), single shots (medium shots and a close-up) are used after the opening master shot. This produces two results. First, it tends to fragment space, and secondly, it prevents us from seeing the player speaking and the players who are listening in one shot. Compare this with the next sequence.

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In this next series of six frames (6-11), OTS shots have been used to unify space. After the establishing shot, an entire conversation can be comfortably handled in OTS shots and an occasional three-shot or two-shot to vary the rhythm. As you can see, the OTS shots are framed in the same way we would handle the staging if there were only two players. The several OTS variations in the I pattern introduced in the last chapter all apply to the staging we are looking at here.

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7



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9



10



11



### A Pattern (Version Two)

This "A" pattern staging is a direct positioning of opposed figures as might be expected in an interview or meeting in which the parties are on a formal basis. Again this is a very common staging position whether the players are standing or sitting. Notice that the man's sight line in frame 1 is very close to the camera, placing him in a direct relationship with the viewer. In frame

2 we see the women in profile, and their relationship to the viewer is deferential. It looks as though the women are the listeners and the man is in a position of authority. Frame 3 preserves this relationship even though we do not see the man's face. This is because a down shot of this type is not the type of framing we would expect if either woman had anything important to say.



Compare frames 4-6 with the last series. Frame 4 places the man in a very direct relationship with the viewer. Personally, I do not like the rendition of space in frames 4 and 5. Frame 5 was shot with a 40mm lens, but it looks too wide to me. What do you think about frame 6? Now look at both sequences and compare the experience of "reading" them. Which sequence do you find the most successful in terms of shot flow? If you could substitute shots from one sequence for some in the other which ones would you choose?



In this next series you can see how the man's presence is diminished when he is not in a frontal position. Before he was in command; now he is in a reactive position. If we started with a picture of the woman facing the camera followed by the profile shot of the man in frame 7, the woman would be in the position of authority.





### A Pattern (Version Two)

The two series of frames below are a good comparison of overlapped space and discontinuous space within a frame. Frame 10 in the top row is an OTS shot and includes some of the man from the previous shot. This is what is meant by *overlapping* space. The reverse CU shot in frame 11 does not include space from the previous shot and is therefore *discontinuous*. Overlapping ties together the scene space. At the same time, close-ups like the ones in frames 12 and 14 isolate a subject in a way that might be justified dramatically.

Notice how frames 11 and 13 serve as pivot shots directing our attention to the appropriate CU, frame 12 or 14. The direction of the man's look is the determining factor. Cutting on his head turn is a powerful editing cue.

One last point to be made is the importance of lens choice. These shots were all photographed in the 50 to 90mm range. The three shots, frames 9 and 13, were the widest at 50mm, and it might have been possible to bring the women in the foreground into a closer relationship with the man with a longer lens. Manipulating scene space with the lens is a powerful technique, but if used carelessly it can cause spatial inconsistencies.



### L Pattern (Version One)

Here we see a typical use of the L pattern. An angular view in frame 1 moves to a low-angle OTS shot in frame 2. Actually we are seeing a portion of the man's arm, not his shoulder, and it preserves the spatial unity of the opening shot. We then move to two close-ups. Notice the rhythm created in four frames by the change in shot size and camera angle. We become progressively tighter for three frames and then back out to a slightly wider CU in frame 4. Compare this with the next series.

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Frames 5-7 show how the sequence would look if we only used OTS three-shots. An entire conversation could be shot this way, though frame 6 could be a little tighter. Generally speaking this sequence has a more relaxed, stable feel than the previous version.

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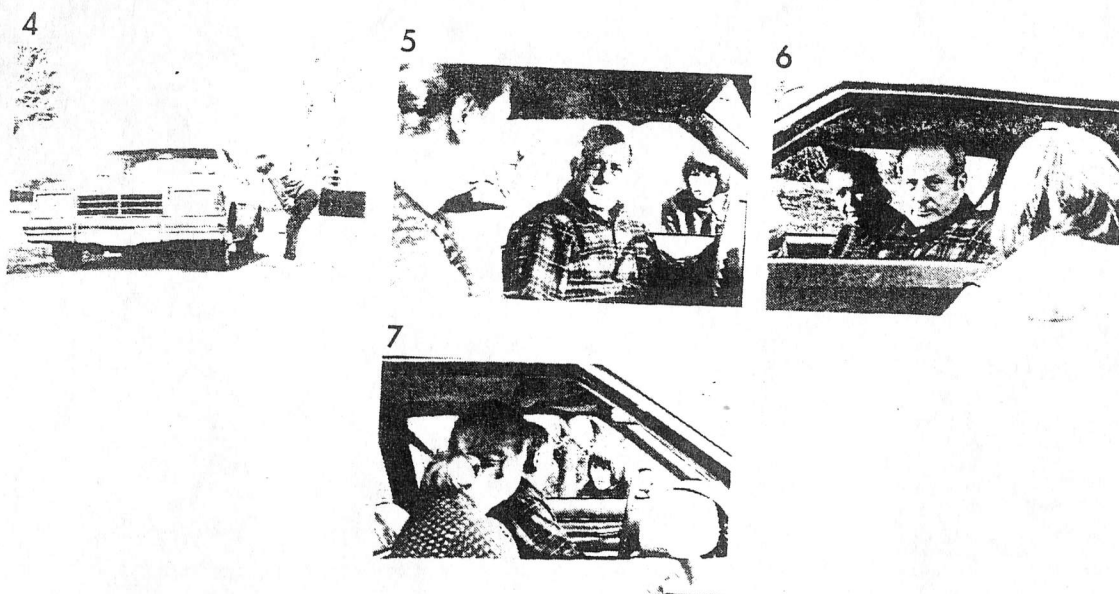


## L Pattern (Version Two)

Here's another version of the L pattern. This time the opening shot of the scene is a two-shot. Not until frame 3 do we see an overview of the scene space. This is an interesting strategy for opening a scene—deliberately withholding the full context of the scene. We also see a typical use of the two-shot in frame 1. It is typical because the L pattern generally groups the two players on the long top of the L together. Almost always, the L seating or standing arrangement occurs when a single player is addressing two others.



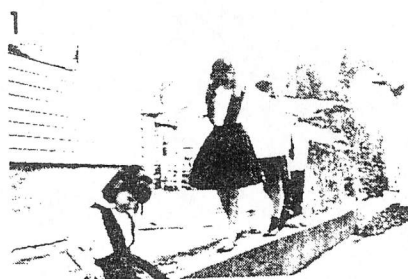
We can compare the use of the three-shot in this last series with the two-shot in the previous series. Both three-shots are OTS framings. An alternative three-shot is shown in the bottom row. One last point: The frames in all these series are necessarily small for presentation purposes. In a theater the subjects in these shots would appear considerably closer and more intimate.





## I Pattern

This is a simple version of a common staging. Once again we can see that the options for cutting tend toward shot, reverse shot patterns. If cutting is not used, we can employ more complex staging in depth, but quite often OTS shots, two-shots and close-ups are the best way to frame the action. In this series we find this strategy working effectively. By adding a dolly move and by repositioning the players, we have obtained many of the same angles seen in multiple shots using only the master shot. Later we'll look at staging techniques that use a master shot for an entire scene.



### A Pattern (In-Depth Staging One)

This next series is an unusual staging of a dialogue sequence. I have included it as a study of in-depth staging and the use of lenses.

Frames 1-4 are straightforward stagings of the players. A line of action is established between the man and the two women. Respecting the line we can move to the low angle two-shot (frame 3) or the subsequent OTS shots of the women (frame 4), which establish a new line.

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If we want to explore more fully the relationship between the man and the women we can use a pair of reverse shots. Here's how we might cross the line: We could open the scene with a medium shot of the man in frame 5. This could be followed by the man's head turn as he looks at the women in the foreground in frame 6. After several seconds the man will turn away, and we can cut to frame 7. Now we can cut to the two-shots or the OTS shots from the previous series. We also have the option of cutting to OTS shots on the *opposite* side of the women after frame 7.

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### A Pattern (In-Depth Staging Two)

This staging in depth is a good example of the use of frontality. It has been designed to work without reverses or shots taken from the side. The camera is able to move all the way to the background to feature the women coming through the gate. After the establishing shot a scene staged this way might only use frames 2 and 3 for an entire conversation.



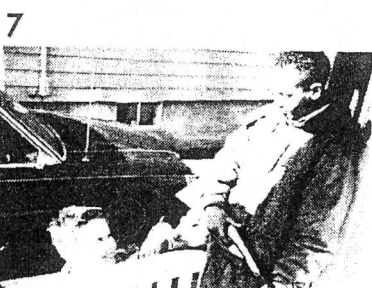
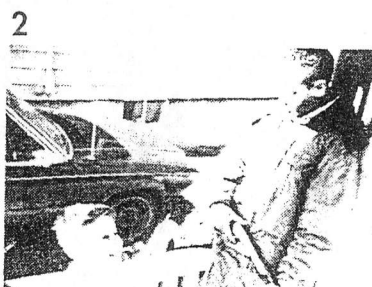
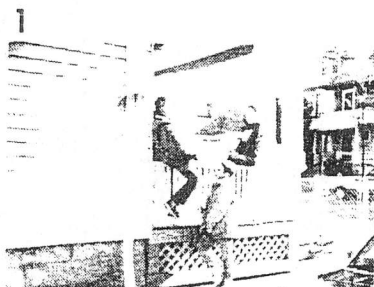
Frames 4-6 represent an alternative establishment of scene space. In this version the scene opens with the woman in the background. We are intrigued by her look and cut to the wider frame of the other two players in frame 5. This is a cut on the look, but it is not a POV shot. That would require a reverse angle. Finally, we widen all the way out in a wide establishing shot. This might serve as a dramatic pause in the middle of the scene or as the final shot.



### A Pattern (Experimenting With the Line of Action)

This A arrangement stages the players at different heights to obtain interesting angles. This is also an example of the unorthodox use of the line of action. Frames 1 and 2 establish the line in an unconventional manner by not basing it on the sight lines of the players. Frame 3 is a radical shift to a low-angle shot. But the scene geography was so clear in frame 1 that we remember where the boy on the railing was seated. Also the gun stock was deliberately included in the shot as a spatial signpost.

Frame 4 observes the new line established between the two boys on the railing, but in frame 5 we violate that line to get the shot of the boy standing on the ground. Frame 6 is a reestablishing shot and frame 7 again crosses the line. It is likely that an actual sequence would use head turns and other spatial cues that would make the editing pattern more cohesive. However, whether or not this rule-breaking approach works for you is your decision.



### L Pattern (Version Three)

Here's an alternative treatment of the previous scene. In this version the cut on the look motivates many of the shots. We open with the three-shot in frame 1 (the third boy is hidden behind the railing). In frame 2 we cut to a reverse on the boy's head turn and look. We reverse again and move to the CU of the boy behind the railing looking back. In frame 4 the boy seated on the railing throws a pebble at the boy behind the railing who looks up in frame 5. We open up to a wide shot in frame 6 as the boy in the foreground calls to his two friends. This motivates the head turn of the boy in CU in frame 7. Throughout this sequence cutting has been motivated by either action or the cut on the look.





# 1 FOUR OR MORE PLAYER DIALOGUE STAGINGS

**S**taging dialogue scenes with four or more subjects utilizes the same A, I and L patterns that we used for three-player dialogue scenes. However, as the number of subjects grows, so do the possibilities for individual shots or group shots. For instance, for a scene with five subjects, there are 5 possible CUs, 9 two-shots, 6 three-shots, 6 four-shots and 1 five-person master shot, or approximately 27 shots. Obviously, this is an overwhelming number of choices for any scene, and while some setups are clearly impractical, photographing groupings with more than three subjects is a matter of consolidation and simplification.

In nearly all cases, dramatic structure in fiction does this for us by representing a generalized view of the human situation through the actions of individuals. In practical terms this is found in any scene involving large numbers of people when we focus on the key experiences of the main characters within a compressed time frame. While these are dramatic conventions, they are similar to how we experience any large gathering of people in real life. At a dinner party, for example, people arrange themselves

into small groups because it's simply too difficult to converse with more than five or six people simultaneously. Even when one person gains the attention of the other guests, it's basically a two-person arrangement: the speaker and his audience. When filming a large group where several players speak, close-ups are often used in favor of three- and four-player group shots, since this helps differentiate the players.

If we look at Figure 11.1 we see one man surrounded by seven other people. It would be unusual for each of these players to have significant speaking parts. Even if

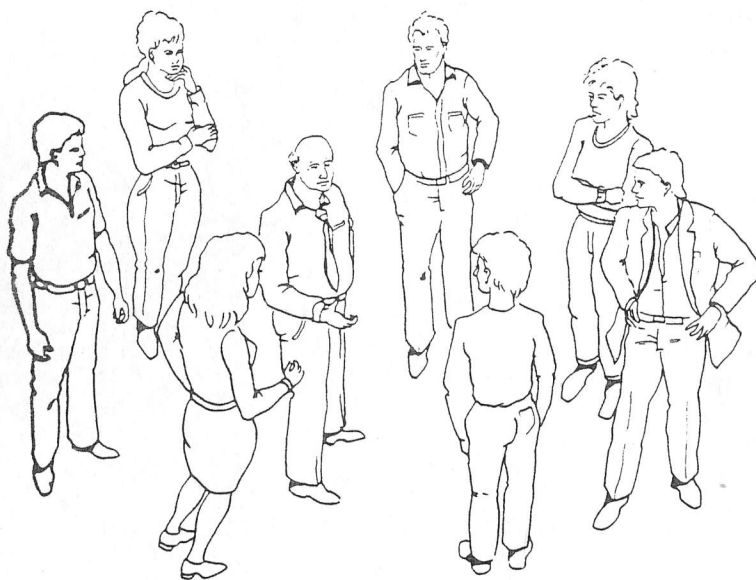


Figure 11.1



that were the case, one or two players would almost certainly emerge as the central players. The key to camera positioning is identifying which players are the central players in the scene.

Figure 11.2 shows the line of action established between the principal two players in the scene. CUs of all the other players might be used, but the basic staging preserves the line of action as established by these players.

Figure 11.3 shows what happens if three players share the dialogue equally. In this case the A pattern applies and the camera can be positioned accordingly. As we learned in the previous chapter, even the A pattern is ultimately reduced to the two-subject I position when determining the line of action. The players who do not have dialogue may be included in the shot, but the camera position is restricted to the 180-degree working area on one side of the line of action.

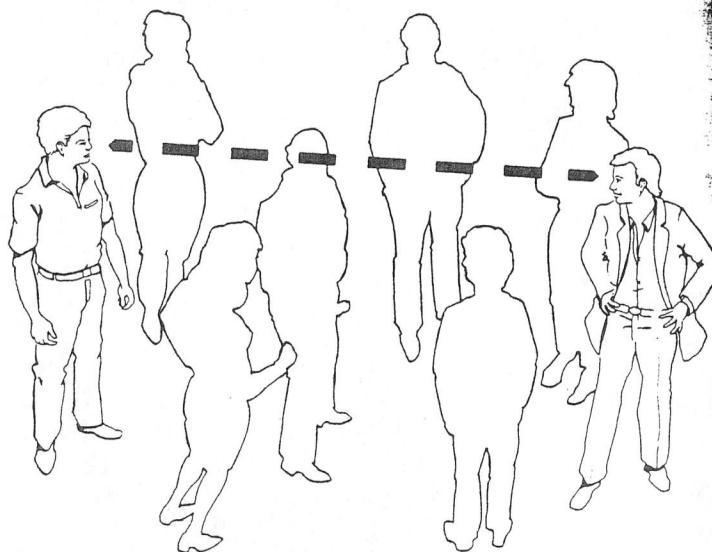


Figure 11.2

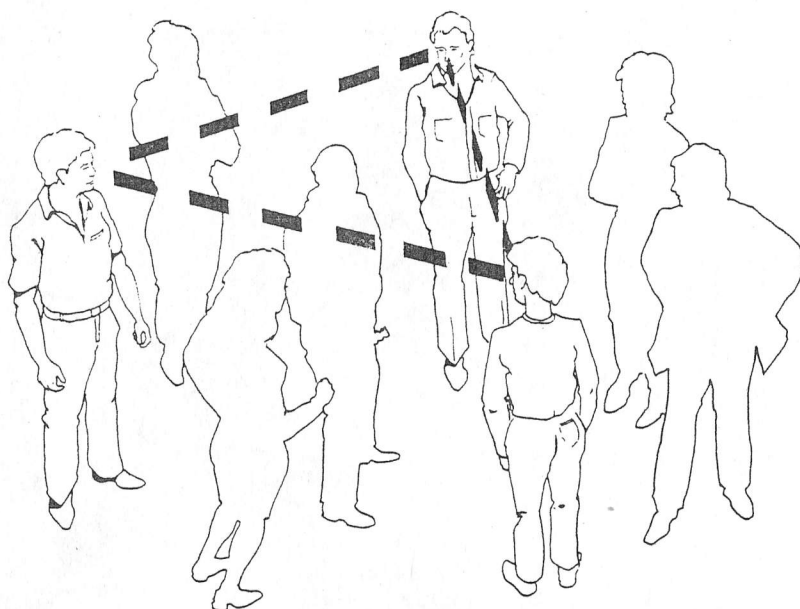


Figure 11.3

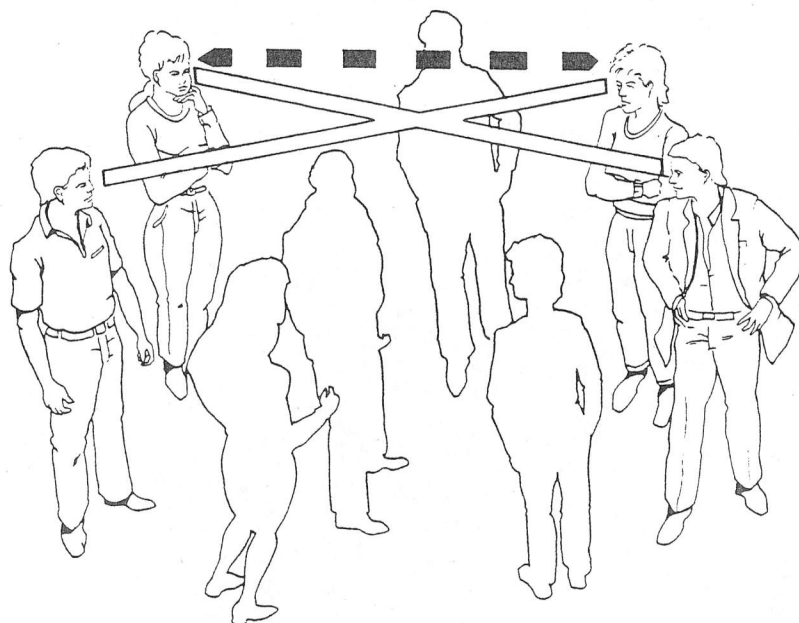


Figure 11.4

In Figure 11.4 the same logic applies to four key players. In this situation we have multiple lines of sight or potential lines of action. While it is possible to puzzle out camera placement for each pair of players, there is a simpler way to work out the staging. Limit yourself to a few key setups. If you are establishing more than four sightlines to move around space in a large group, you are creating unnecessary problems. The dotted line in Figure 11.4 represents a basic line of action that permits close-ups, singles, two-shots and a group shot. This means that we are establishing a general viewing direction.

It should be mentioned at this point that all this attention to the line of action and camera setup implies an active cutting style. In any of the previous examples of large group stagings, a single camera setup could be used, and this of course would eliminate continuity problems.

While it is easy to visualize this in illustrations from an uncluttered high-angle view, it can be anything but simple to visualize a scene when you're on the set with a large cast. But no matter how complex the staging becomes, the camera geography of any scene is easily determined by keeping the line of action in mind. This is true whether you choose to violate the line or not. The Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu, whose staging style required him to cross the line, was as consistent in his rejection of the traditional rules of continuity as any Hollywood director is in observing them. The purpose of describing staging in terms of the line of action is to help a director make clearheaded choices. The line and the patterns based on the line should be thought of as a system of organization, not as an aesthetic choice. If it helps you to break through to some new way of working, so much the better.

### A Pattern (Version One)

This time 5 players are seated in a circular arrangement. In this case it's possible to interpret the staging as an I, A or L arrangement depending on which players are being emphasized. The determination of the line of action, general viewing angle and staging pattern is your choice.

In this situation, the predominant viewing angle is over the shoulder of the grandmother shown in Figure 3. All the other players can be viewed from this position. Only one reverse is required to see the grandmother.

In this situation the line of action is extremely flexible. The reason is that the line of action is generally determined by the sight line of the players featured in the scene. As you can see, there are so many possible sight lines in this circular staging that we could easily establish a new line anywhere in the scene space.

Frames 2, 3 and 4 show an editing pattern in which subjects on the sides of the table are seen in angular shots, essentially from the point of view of the grandmother in frame 3. An unorthodox alternative is the side-by-side OTS shots of the grandmother in frames 5 and 6.





## L Pattern

This is a good example of how a group of four players is treated in CUs, two-shots and three-shots. In this arrangement the two girls seated side-by-side clearly work as a two-shot and form the center of the scene. We can frame them as though they were one player opposite the boy, which means we are essentially working with the I pattern.

In frame 1 we set up the full group and move into a wide OTS three-shot in frame 2 (the fourth figure is partially visible). The OTS two-shot in frame 3, the two-shot in frame 4 and the medium single shot in frame 5 make up one simplified treatment of the scene, assuming that editing is called for.

To show how easy it would be to stage the scene for a single master shot, consider frame 2. If the camera were shifted a few feet to the right and tilted up, all four figures would be framed. In this arrangement the seated figures would be in profile and the standing figure would be in a frontal position.

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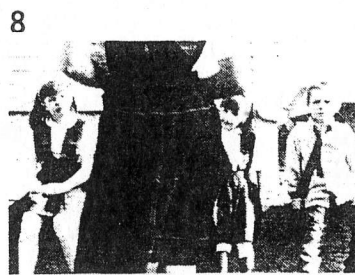
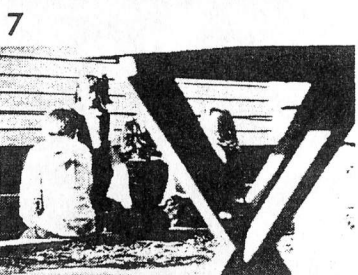
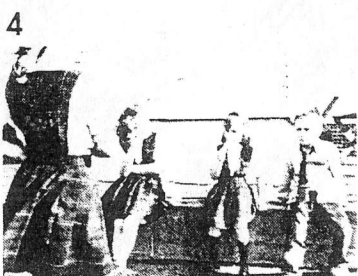
### A Pattern (Version Two)

This next series of nine panels shows three staging possibilities comparing I, L and A pattern stagings. In the first example we have a classic three angle treatment of the I pattern. Panel 1 shows the head-on center position. From a closer position, but still located midpoint between the subjects, the camera is pivoted left and right to obtain panels 2 and 3.

In the second sequence we open up with the girl who is standing lined up to one side of the seated figures. This makes it the L pattern. At the same time the camera has been moved to a position almost along the line of action and outside the scene space. Two angular shots give us a single and a three-shot.

In this next sequence we have an A pattern interpretation of the same scene. In this case the girl standing is lined up so that she is flanked by the subjects in frames 7 and 8. In these two shots the line of action practically runs through the camera position.

Patterns can also be mixed. If you read the frames vertically, for instance, panels 1, 4 and 7 shots from the I, L, and A patterns work together quite comfortably. The choice is essentially between symmetrical or asymmetrical framings. This is most obvious in the shot, reverse shot pattern.

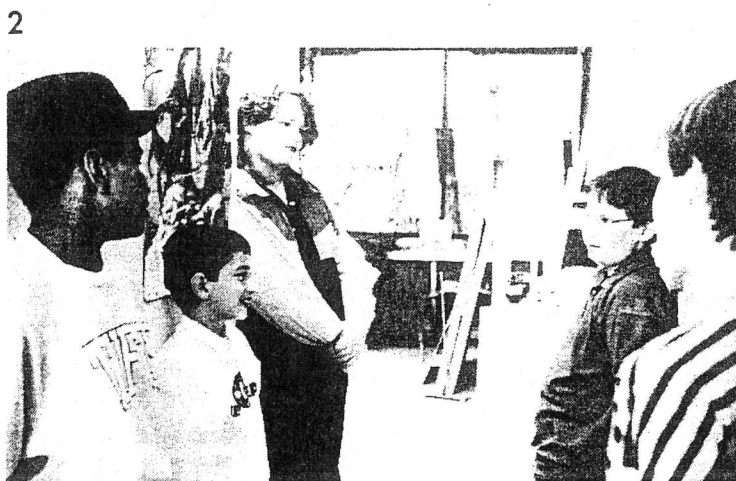


## Frontal Positions for Single Setups

By now the various possibilities for staging two-, three- and four-or-more-subject dialogue sequences should be familiar as recognizable framing and editing patterns. In mid-sized groups where each subject is dramatically significant, master shot stagings are often desirable. The three examples that follow show asymmetrical stagings and the use of depth in figure placement.



In a group master shot in which the action is staged for one viewpoint, the screen too easily becomes the theatrical proscenium. Rather than have a scene staged across the frame, players can be staged along the lens axis, as with the group of boys in the hallway in frames 1 and 2. Here the players are seen in profile. Foreground players may turn from the camera occasionally to react to background players, but they can be directed to speak or respond to players across from them as well.

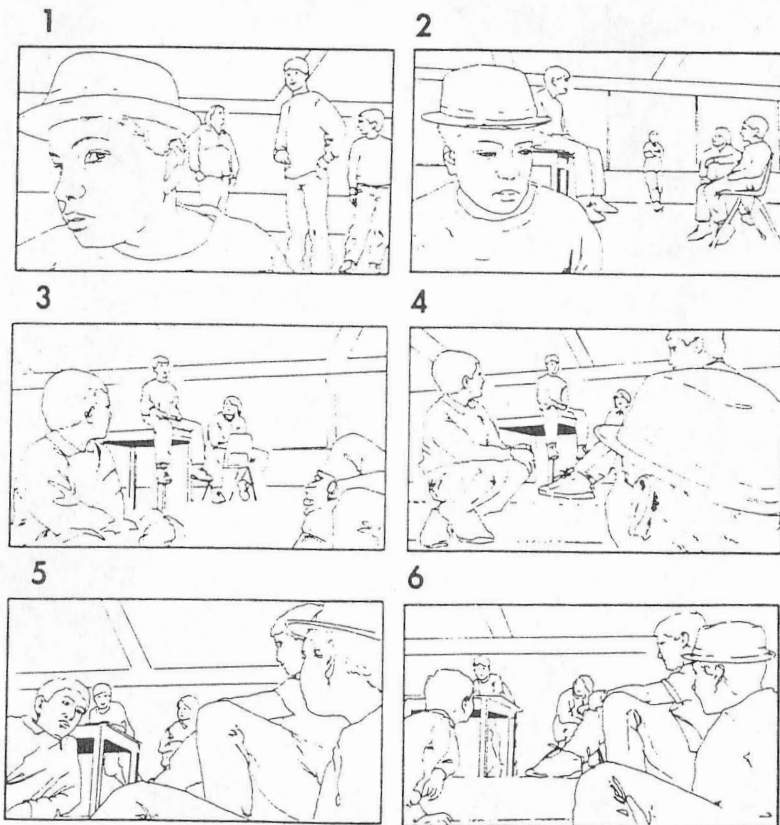


## In-Depth Frontal Positions

In this next series of frames, an in-depth composition is used with a foreground player close to the camera. The overly composed theatrical positioning in frame 3 is modified in frame 4 so that the background players form a looser group arrangement.

The evolution of the compositions in frames 1-6 is representative of the staging process carried out on the set by the director, the actors and the cinematographer. Frames 1 through 6 are all ways of dealing with the same scene, with frame 5 coming closest to an acceptable solution. However, I would probably bring the seated figure on the right forward slightly.

When staging groups, filmmakers are sometimes fearful that their players are not seen clearly within the frame. The result of overcomposed figures is staginess, and the only cure is a disregard for ordered framing. In the following examples figures are overlapped or cut off by the frame, and this freedom permits many more options for staging action. This style of composition is known as open framing and will be discussed further in a later chapter.



## Crowds and Large Groups

In concluding the dialogue staging section we come to the treatment of individual players when they are in crowds or other large gatherings of people.



When staging a dialogue scene in a crowd, the subjects in conversation are still placed in accordance with the concepts we applied to 2, 3, and 4 players. However, there are some additional camera techniques available that solve some of the spatial problems that arise when the scene space is densely packed with people.

There are two basic approaches to shooting dialogue in or around a crowd: The camera is either in the crowd looking out or outside the crowd looking in. The execution of each approach is largely dependent on the focal length of the lens that you use. Shots framed from within the action are normally taken with a wide or normal lens, while shots taken from outside the action are shot with a telephoto lens.

### **Telephoto Lenses**

Apart from the specific visual appeal of a telephoto shot, long lenses have become popular in the shooting of large crowds for logistical reasons. For instance, it is possible to simulate large masses of people with a limited number of extras strategically placed in depth for the telephoto lens. In addition, due to the shallow depth of field, the telephoto lens can isolate principal subjects from foreground and background elements whether the crowd is staged or real.

At the same time, the camera can be placed at a distance from the crowd, making it easier for the cameraman to work. Spatial relationships within shots and between shots are indefinite due to the shallow depth of field, and the specific location of action is difficult to identify. The telephoto lens permits cameramen to work in crowds discretely, allowing them to photograph actors in real situations (as in the photos accompanying this section.)

The use of the telephoto requires keeping the camera outside the action. If the camera were in the midst of the crowd, it would have to be a great distance from the players in order to frame them, thereby allowing too many extras to come between the camera and the subjects. The result would be that the crowd would obscure the players. Therefore, telephoto shots of subjects within a crowd must be carefully staged so that just the right number of people move between the camera and players. Since this turns out to be only a few people, 10 to 15 extras can be made to seem like a big crowd.

### **Wide Lenses**

Staging action for the wide lens is far more difficult. Generally, the camera is in the action, close to the subject of the shot. As with the telephoto shot, extras must be carefully arranged between camera and subject, but the greater depth of field and clarity of the normal lens is less forgiving in terms of framing. The positioning of figures is much more critical, and a slight variation of any element can wreck the shot. If the camera and subject move, many more extras are necessary, and because the camera is within the action, a quarter turn takes in 90 degrees of space. This is space that might require dozens or hundreds of extras to fill. At the same time, the camera and crew have to work in close quarters and moving dolly track or lights requires clearing the area.

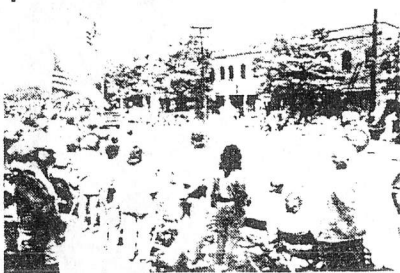


For all this, the normal lens has decided advantages for creating understandable geography, as well as for its particular graphic qualities. It is usually necessary to stage physical action with the wider lenses, while dialogue stagings can be shot with a telephoto. We can now look at some examples of actual shots.

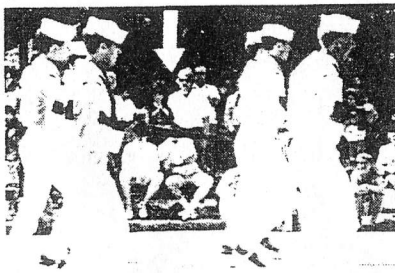
### Lens Comparisons for Crowd Scenes

The arrow indicates the subjects of our shots. Frame 1 is a moderate wide-angle shot (35mm) outside the action. Frame 2 is shot through the parade and views our subjects from within the action using a 40mm lens.

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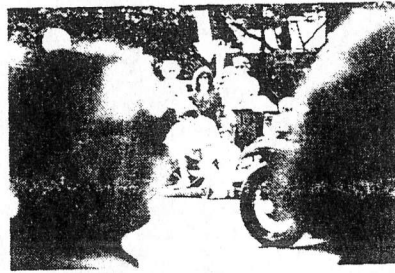


In frame 3 we are again on the same side of the street as our subjects, this time with a longer lens to bring the background closer. One slightly unorthodox effect is that the subjects are in soft focus due to the shallow depth of field. While some filmmakers object to allowing principal subjects to go soft even while they remain the center of attention, I find that the subjects can be recognized if their clothes or appearance has been estab-

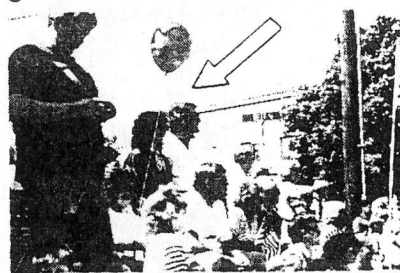
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lished in previous shots. Frame 4, taken with a 500mm lens was shot from across the street using two foreground spectators as a framing device. Finally, frames 5 and 6 are on the perimeter of the action, very nearly in the thick of things, shot with a 50mm lens.

We conclude with a comparison of lenses. First is a 40mm lens with figures in the middle ground, second is a 50mm lens with the figures in the foreground and last is a 300mm lens shot with the figures in the background.



40mm lens



50mm lens



300mm lens